

# Benjamin Franklin: The Man Who Invented the American Dream

by Jim Powell

**B**enjamin Franklin pioneered the spirit of self-help in America. With less than three years of formal schooling, he taught himself almost everything he knew. He took the initiative of learning French, German, Italian, Latin, and Spanish. He taught himself how to play the guitar, violin, and harp. He made himself an influential author and editor. He started a successful printing business, newspaper, and magazine. He developed a network of printing partnerships throughout the American colonies.

When Franklin saw that something needed doing, he did it. In Philadelphia, he helped launch the city's first police force, the first volunteer fire company, the first fire insurance firm, the first hospital, the first public library, and the academy that became the first institution of higher learning (the University of Pennsylvania). As postmaster, he doubled and tripled the frequency of mail deliveries.

Franklin, who reportedly amassed early America's largest private library, helped expand the frontiers of science and invention. He started the American Philosophical Soci-

ety, which was this country's first scientific society and maintained the first science library, first museum, and first patent office; more than 90 members of this society went on to win Nobel Prizes. On his eight trans-Atlantic crossings, Franklin made measurements that helped chart the Gulf Stream. He pioneered the study of water flowing around a hull—hydrodynamics. He investigated meteorology. He invented bifocal spectacles. He was most famous, of course, for his experiments with electricity, especially lightning. His lightning rod helped banish the terror of thunderstorms.

Franklin had more to do with founding the American republic than anyone else. As American representative in London, he helped persuade Parliament to repeal despised Stamp Act taxes, giving America an additional decade to prepare for armed conflict with Britain. He was on the committee that named Thomas Jefferson to draft the Declaration of Independence. He went to France and secured military help as well as a formal alliance, without which America probably wouldn't have won the Revolutionary War. He helped negotiate the peace with Britain. He crafted a compromise that helped prevent the collapse of the Constitutional Convention, and he was the one who moved that the Constitution be adopted.

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Franklin, more than anybody, linked the emerging international movements for liberty. James Madison recalled that he “never passed half an hour in his company without hearing some observation or anecdote worth remembering.” Franklin dined with *Wealth of Nations* author Adam Smith. The Scottish philosopher David Hume told Franklin: “America has sent us many good things, Gold, Silver, Sugar, Tobacco, Indigo, &c. But you are the first Philosopher, and indeed the first Great Man of Letters for whom we are beholden.” Edmund Burke, who had opposed Britain’s war against America, called Franklin “the friend of mankind.” When the French wit Voltaire met William Temple Franklin, he quipped: “God and Liberty! It is the only benediction which can be given to the grandson of Franklin.” Laissez-faire economist Anne Robert Jacques Turgot remarked that Franklin “snatched the lightning from heaven and the scepter from tyrants.”

Franklin was a late-blooming radical. During his 30s, he brokered the sale of some slaves as a sideline for his general store. He and his wife owned two slaves. In 1758, when he was 52, he suggested establishing Philadelphia’s first school for blacks. He abandoned his support for the British Empire and committed himself to the American Revolution when he was 70. Philadelphia Quakers had launched the abolitionist movement by organizing the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery (1775), but its activities ceased during the Revolution; this pioneering society revived in 1787 when Franklin became its president, at 81. Two years later he voiced his support for the ideals of the French Revolution.

Franklin was famous for his charm and tact, which enabled him to get the most out of people, but he had detractors. For instance, John Adams complained that “I could never obtain the favour of his Company in a Morning before Breakfast which would have been the most convenient time to read over the Letters and papers. . . . Mr. Franklin kept a horn book always in his Pockett in which he minuted all his invitations to dinner, and Mr. [Arthur] Lee said it was the only thing in which he was punctual . . . and after that went

sometimes to the Play, sometimes to the Philosophers but most commonly to visit those Ladies. . . .” John Dickinson, head of Pennsylvania’s delegation to Congress, hated Franklin so much that he refused to install a lightning rod on his Philadelphia mansion—and it was struck by lightning.

While Franklin was generous with his friends and adopted families, he could be insensitive with his own. He disregarded pleas from his dying wife, Deborah, whom he hadn’t seen in almost a dozen years, to return home from Britain where he represented American colonial interests. He refused to approve his daughter’s proposed marriage to the man she loved. His son’s decision to side with Britain during the American Revolution provoked a bitter break that never healed.

As biographer Ronald W. Clark noted, Franklin “was only an inch or two less than six feet in height, thickset and muscular, with dark brown hair above friendly hazel eyes. He was obviously able to look after himself, a distinct advantage in the rougher eighteenth century. . . . These physical attributes were compounded by a nimbleness of mind, so that in argument as well as in action he tended to be off the mark quicker than most men. Above all, and largely concealed by his instinctive hail-fellow-well-met nature, there was a steely determination to succeed and some impatience with those who got in his way.”

## Childhood and Youth

Benjamin Franklin was born in a Milk Street, Boston, house January 17, 1706, the tenth son of Abia Folger, daughter of an indentured servant. His father Josiah Franklin was a candlemaker.

At eight, he was sent to Boston’s Latin school with the idea of entering Harvard, which would prepare him for the ministry. But Harvard required unquestioning devotion, and Franklin exhibited some religious skepticism. At one point, for instance, he suggested that his father shorten his lengthy mealtime prayers and “say Grace over the whole cask—it would be a vast saving of time.” Within two years, Franklin was transferred to a more practical Boston school for

writing and arithmetic. He apprenticed in his father's candlemaking shop.

But by age 12, he had become restless. Apparently because he began to enjoy books, his father arranged for him to apprentice with his 21-year-old brother James, who had set himself up as a Boston printer. "I was fond of reading," Franklin recalled, "and all the little money that came into my hands was ever laid out in books." Among other titles, he read Plutarch's *Lives*, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

Franklin gained experience writing when his brother began publishing a newspaper, the *New-England Courant*. At 16, he anonymously wrote 14 articles known as the *Dogood Papers*, satirizing religious dogmas and government officials, and his brother published them apparently without ever knowing the identity of the author. As a consequence, the Massachusetts Governor's Council sentenced James Franklin to a month in jail, and it ordered him to stop publishing the *New-England Courant*. The paper continued to appear, however—under Benjamin Franklin's name. But the brothers began squabbling, apparently over control. Impatient to become his own man, he ran away from home in September 1723.

Somewhere along the line, Franklin learned how to be more tactful and persuasive. He expressed himself "in Terms of modest Diffidence, never using when I advance any thing that may possibly be disputed, the Words *Certainly, undoubtedly, or any others that give the Air of Positiveness to an Opinion*; but rather say, I conceive, or I apprehend a Thing to be so and so, It appears to me, or I should think it so or so for such & such Reasons, or I imagine it to be so, or it is so if I am not mistaken."

Franklin went to Philadelphia, where he heard a printer was looking for help. "I was dirty from my Journey," he wrote about his arrival at the Market Street Wharf, "my Pockets were stuff'd out with Shirts & Stockings; I knew no Soul, or where to look for Lodging. I was fatigued with Travelling, Rowing & Want of Rest. I was very hungry, and my whole Stock of Cash consisted of a Dutch

Dollar and about a Shilling in Copper." Yet as biographer Ronald Clark noted, Franklin "was distinctly presentable, a well-set-up young man in his early twenties, lacking the plumpness of his later years and radiating an apparently inexhaustible energy."

## Young Ben Franklin in London

Franklin got a job and somehow met Pennsylvania's governor William Keith, who needed a good printer. Although Franklin was just 18, his evident intelligence made him a standout. The governor offered to provide financing so Franklin could establish his own print shop. Accordingly, in November 1724 he sailed for England to buy about £100 of printing equipment, but the governor's promise turned out to be worthless. During the next 20 months, Franklin worked for a couple of big London printers. He wrote a pamphlet which, questioning certain religious doctrines, served as a calling card. Franklin met Bernard Mandeville, the Dutch doctor who wrote *The Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices, Public Benefits*, anticipating Adam Smith's idea of the "invisible hand."

London, an intellectual capital of Europe, had expanded Franklin's vision. He had become a first-class printer and met many sophisticated people. During the tedious 79-day voyage home, he wrote down some principles for success. His original draft was lost, but the main points were probably similar to what he remembered later: "1. It is necessary for me to be extremely frugal for some time, till I have paid what I owe. 2. To endeavor to speak truth in every instance, to give nobody expectations that are not likely to be answered, but aim at sincerity in every word and action; the most amiable excellence in a rational being. 3. To apply myself industriously to whatever business I take in hand, and not divert my mind from my business by any foolish project of growing suddenly rich; for industry and patience are the surest means of plenty. 4. I resolve to speak ill of no man whatever, not even in a matter of truth; but rather by some means excuse the faults I hear charged upon others, and, upon proper

occasions, speak all the good I know of everybody.”

Within months after his return in late 1726, he was in business for himself. He landed a contract to print Pennsylvania’s currency—and, alas, promoter that he was, he touted it in a pamphlet, *A Modest Enquiry into the Nature and Necessity of a Paper-Currency*. Franklin printed a wide range of things, including the first novel published in America (Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*), and sold material printed by others, including Bibles and all kinds of legal forms. Moreover, Franklin served as a moneylender for the poor, providing as little as two shillings.

### ***The Pennsylvania Gazette* and “Poor Richard”**

Franklin bought a failing newspaper, changed its name to *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, wrote many of the articles himself and made money. The December 28, 1732, issue announced that he would be offering *Poor Richard: an Almanack*. It was published annually until 1758, offering memorable aphorisms about success. For instance: “God helps them that helps themselves. . . . Diligence is the Mother of Good-Luck. . . . Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise. . . . Well done is better than well said. . . . He that has a Trade, has an Office of Profit and Honour. . . . Life with Fools consists in Drinking; With the wise Man Living’s Thinking. . . . Employ thy time well, if thou meanest to gain leisure. . . . As Pride increases, Fortune declines. . . . Be always ashamed to catch thy self idle. . . . Wink at small faults; remember thou hast great ones. . . . Folly and Wickedness shortens Life. . . . Drive thy business; let not that drive thee. . . . When you’re good to others, you are best to yourself. . . . Love, and be lov’d.” *Poor Richard’s Almanack* sold some 10,000 copies a year—a big number in those days—and helped make Franklin a household name.

Meanwhile, in 1727, Franklin started a group called the “Junto,” which he described as “a Club for mutual Improvement.” Participants—many of whom were young apprentices—suggested “one or more Queries on

any Point of Morals, Politics, or Natural Philosophy, to be discuss’d by the Company, and once in three Months produce & read an Essay of his own Writing on any Subject he pleased.” They met weekly on Friday evenings, initially at a tavern and later in a rented room. When the Junto reached what Franklin considered an optimum size (12), he encouraged interested people to form their own groups, and they sprouted all around Philadelphia.

During the next three decades, Franklin’s Junto helped pioneer many of Philadelphia’s institutions, starting with the city’s first public library. After members discussed the idea, it was considered by people in the other groups. Then Franklin talked about it in the columns of *The Pennsylvania Gazette*. The library began by charging an entrance fee and an annual subscription fee. Next, to provide greater security against crime, Franklin started City Watch, which organized teams of constables patrolling neighborhoods at night. Through the Junto, Franklin promoted the paving, cleaning, and lighting of streets.

Reflecting his cosmopolitan view, Franklin decided that “The first drudgery of settling new colonies, which confines the attention of people to mere necessities, is now pretty well over. . . .” He believed it was time “to cultivate the finer arts and improve the common stock of knowledge.” In 1744, he and fellow Junto members helped organize the American Philosophical Society; he served as its first secretary.

Franklin thought college education should be available to people in Pennsylvania—as it was available in Connecticut (Yale), Massachusetts (Harvard), and Virginia (William and Mary). He discussed his idea with members of the Junto and wrote a pamphlet, *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania*. He recommended that the curriculum focus on basic skills like writing and speaking. His proposed reading list included works by the seventeenth-century radical author Algernon Sidney and *Cato’s Letters*, the influential early eighteenth-century case for natural rights. In 1749, Franklin was elected the first president of this new Academy, helping to recruit trustees, raise money,

rent a house, and hire teachers. The Academy prospered and went on to become the University of Pennsylvania.

A doctor named Thomas Bond tried to establish Philadelphia's first hospital, but he couldn't get support. People assumed that if the project were worthwhile, Franklin would be involved. So Bond approached Franklin, who became a subscriber and enthusiastically solicited support from others. This was the beginning of Pennsylvania Hospital.

Franklin was becoming a successful self-made man, but his life wasn't complete. He had some romantic adventures, one of which brought a son, William. On September 1, 1730, he began a common-law marriage with Deborah Read, a carpenter's daughter. They had a son, Francis, who died four years later from smallpox, and a daughter, Sally (Sarah), who was born in 1743. Franklin's first son, William, lived with them. Deborah seems to have been a barely literate homebody, and she couldn't begin to keep up with her husband. During the next 45 years, she displayed phenomenal patience as he spent decades away on business throughout the colonies and Europe.

By 1748, Franklin turned over management of his printing business to a partner and retired from it, while continuing to receive half the profits. He still edited *The Pennsylvania Gazette* and *Poor Richard*.

With his buoyant curiosity, Franklin pursued myriad scientific interests. He investigated weather patterns. Before geology was a science, Franklin speculated about the origin of mountains. He invented a more efficient wood-burning stove, connected to a radiator. In 1744, he started popularizing this stove as the Pennsylvania Fire Place.

## Experiments with Electricity

Franklin began to experiment with electricity. He determined that there were two kinds of charges, which he called "positive" and "negative." In June 1752, he climbed a Philadelphia hill, flew a silk kite during a thunderstorm, touched one knuckle to a key on the wet string—and felt an electrical shock. Franklin published *Experiments and Observa-*

*tions on Electricity*, and it was translated into French, German, Italian, and Latin. The English editor and statesman Lord Brougham marveled, years later, that Franklin "could make an experiment with less apparatus and conduct his experimental inquiry to a discovery with more ordinary materials than any other philosopher we ever saw. With an old key, a silk thread, some sealing-wax, and a sheet of paper, he discovered the identity of lightning and electricity." Franklin developed lightning rods that could draw lightning away from a house and protect it from fire. Lightning rods earned Franklin the gratitude of people throughout America and Europe. Harvard and Yale universities awarded him honorary degrees. He was elected a Fellow of the English Royal Society and the French Académie des Sciences.

By the time Franklin had become famous for his experiments on electricity, he was in the thick of Pennsylvania politics. He was elected to the Pennsylvania Assembly in August 1751. As Britain and France struggled for control of North America, the French won over many Indian tribes as allies, and people in Pennsylvania were vulnerable to attack. The Penn family, known as "the Proprietors" because they owned the colony, refused to mount a defense. Franklin helped organize a people's militia. In 1754, the British Board of Trade and Plantations asked nine colonies north of the Potomac River to participate in a Congress aimed at preventing the Iroquois Indians from becoming allies of the French. Pennsylvania's governor appointed Franklin as a representative, and the conference took place in Albany, New York, "the gateway to French Canada," as historian Catherine Drinker Bowen called it. A peace treaty was signed. Franklin proposed the "Albany Plan of Union," which would have established a federal union of the colonies under the British crown. Although the plan wasn't adopted, Franklin had emerged as a person whose vision and capabilities could take him far beyond Pennsylvania.

He prepared the 1758 *Poor Richard* and turned it into a pamphlet. Lacking fresh material, he rewrote some of his aphorisms. For instance: "I will tell thee, my friend, what



Poor Richard says, Employ thy time well if thou meanest to gain leisure; and, since thou art not sure of a minute, throw not away an hour. Leisure is time for doing something useful; this leisure the diligent man will obtain, but the lazy man never; so that, as poor Richard says A life of leisure and a life of laziness are two things. No, for as poor Richard says, Trouble springs from idleness, and grievous toil from needless ease. Many without labour, would live by their wits only, but they break for want of stock. Whereas industry gives comfort, and plenty, and respect." This little work was issued as *The Way to Wealth*, which went into nine Spanish printings, 11 German printings, 56 French printings, and 70 English printings. Moreover, it also appeared in Bohemian, Catalan, Chinese, Danish, Dutch, Gaelic, Greek, Polish, Russian, Swedish, and Welsh.

Pennsylvania politics intensified. Many people resented the Penns because their vast landholdings were tax-exempt. Since Franklin had been to England, was well known in Europe, and had proven himself as a negotiator, the Assembly sent him to London where, it was hoped, he could secure their interests against the Penns. After a fruitless discussion with Thomas Penn, William Penn's son, it was clear that Franklin was in for a long stay. He learned the fine art of British-style lobbying. He brought to it his skill of writing letters and essays—he contributed 32 articles to the *London Chronicle*, 33 articles to the *Public Advertiser*, and additional articles in *The Citizen* and *The Gentleman's Magazine*. He anonymously collaborated with fellow Pennsylvania agent Richard Jackson to produce *An Historical Review of the Constitution and Government of Pennsylvania* (1758), a polemic against the Penns; and *The Interest of Great Britain Considered, With Regard to her Colonies, And the Acquisitions of Canada and Guadeloupe* (1760), a pamphlet supporting the expansion of the British Empire. Franklin dined out six days a week, developing relationships with influential people. In April 1759, the Pennsylvania Assembly had passed a bill which aimed to raise £100,000 for defense against the French—by taxing all land. It specified that the long tax-exempt

Penn properties would be taxed, at a rate no higher than any other property. The bill was upheld in London.

Soon after Franklin returned on November 1, 1759, battles resumed with the Penns. He was convinced Pennsylvania would be better run as a royal colony. The Pennsylvania Assembly agreed and sent him back to London the following October. He was appointed by assemblies in Massachusetts and Georgia to represent their interests, too.

## The Stamp Act Crisis

Asking George III to take over Pennsylvania turned out to mean support for British taxation. Britain and France had concluded their costly Seven Years' War, and Britain wanted the Colonies to help pay for it. Parliament passed the Stamp Act, which became law November 1, 1765. It called for taxes on legal documents, newspapers, and playing cards in the colonies, and Franklin accepted it as a fait accompli. He did speak out against "the mistaken Notion . . . that the Colonies were planted at the Expense of Parliament, and that therefore the Parliament has a Right to tax them, &c." America, he emphasized, "had not been conquer'd by either King or Parliament, but was possess'd by a free People."

Franklin was startled by the intensity of colonial resistance to the Stamp Act. He feared the Stamp Act could provoke a break with Britain. Accordingly, he launched one of his trademark propaganda campaigns against it. Writing under such pseudonyms as "Homespun" and "Traveler," he presented a case that it was in Britain's interest to repeal the Stamp Act. When Parliament held hearings on repeal, Franklin was among the 30 witnesses who testified. Asked if Americans would accept a more moderate tax, Franklin declared: "No, never unless compelled by force of arms." The Stamp Act was repealed.

Parliament tried again to assert its supremacy over the colonies. It passed a Quartering Act that empowered the British commander in America to demand lodgings for his soldiers. In June 1767, Parliament enacted new colonial taxes on glass, lead, paint, paper, and

tea. Franklin urged some kind of conciliation, but back in the colonies Boston patriots Samuel Adams and James Otis spurred the Massachusetts Assembly to call for renewed resistance against British policies. Public opinion radicalized after the "Boston Massacre," in which British soldiers killed five Boston patriots.

In 1771, Franklin visited his friend Jonathan Shipley, bishop of St. Asaph, at his Twyford home, near Winchester. There he started work on his autobiography. "Franklin," reported Yale University scholars, "wrote the autobiography on large folio sheets, two leaves or four pages to a sheet. In initial composition he used only one vertical half of each page, leaving the other temporarily blank. As he later reviewed what he had written, he canceled words or phrases in the first draft, inserted between the lines new or revised phraseology, or, if more room was necessary, used the space in the adjoining blank column."

In Britain, Franklin met Anthony Benezet, the Philadelphia Quaker teacher who was probably the earliest abolitionist and an advocate of educating blacks and women. He encouraged Quaker merchants to get out of the slave trade. He introduced Franklin to leading abolitionists and prodded him to join the opposition to the slave trade. In 1772 Franklin wrote "The Somerset Case and the Slave Trade," an unsigned article for the *London Chronicle*. He asked: "Can sweetening our tea with sugar be a circumstance of such absolute necessity? Can the petty pleasure thence arising to the taste compensate for so much misery produced among our fellow creatures, and such a constant butchery of the human species by this pestilential, detestable traffic in the bodies and souls of men?" Franklin agreed to serve on the board of Bray Associates, an organization that established schools for black boys and girls in Newport, New York, Philadelphia, and Williamsburg. In 1774, Franklin wrote the Marquis de Condorcet: "Negroes . . . are not deficient in natural Understanding, but they have not the Advantage of Education."

Somehow, Franklin got his hands on six explosive letters by Massachusetts governor

Thomas Hutchinson. In one, drafted after the Stamp Act crisis, Hutchinson had written: "There must be an abridgment of what are called English liberties . . . there must be a great restraint of natural liberty." On December 2, 1772, Franklin secretly sent them to Thomas Cushing, Speaker of the Massachusetts Assembly, asking that they be kept confidential. But Samuel Adams broke the news, and the letters were published. The Massachusetts Assembly petitioned George III to remove Hutchinson as governor.

In London, Franklin became an outcast. Perhaps attempting to redeem himself, he publicly criticized the "Boston Tea Party" (in which Samuel Adams and the Sons of Liberty dumped 342 chests of British tea into Boston Harbor) and offered to pay for the lost tea. Franklin was summoned to a hearing before the British Privy Council. It cleared Hutchinson of any wrongdoing, and Solicitor General Alexander Wedderburn denounced Franklin. Maverick member of Parliament Charles James Fox warned that "all men tossed up their hats, and clapped their hands in boundless delight, at Mr. Wedderburn's speech against Dr. Franklin, without reckoning the cost it was to entail upon them." As Fox anticipated, this experience irrevocably turned Franklin against Britain.

## The "Shot Heard Round the World"

Before he sailed for America on March 21, 1775, he learned that his wife, Deborah, had died of paralysis. He hadn't seen her in 11 years, and little is known about his feelings toward her. Whatever they were, Franklin became swept up with fast-breaking events. While he was at sea, Paul Revere warned his compatriots that British soldiers were preparing for action in Lexington, Massachusetts, and then came the "shot heard round the world," as Ralph Waldo Emerson later immortalized it. Edmund Burke wrote a friend in the French army: "What say you to your friend and brother Philosopher Franklin, who at upwards of seventy years of age, quits the Study of the Laws of Nature, in order to give Laws to new Commonwealth; and has crossed

the Atlantick ocean at that time of Life, not to seek repose but to lunge into the midst of the most laborious and most arduous affairs that ever were."

On May 6, 1775, the day after Franklin reached Philadelphia, the Pennsylvania Assembly made him a delegate to the Second Continental Congress, and a week later the British government issued an order for his arrest. "My time was never more fully employed," Franklin wrote. "In the morning, at six, I am at the Committee of Safety, appointed by the Assembly to put the province in a state of defense, which Committee holds till nine, when I am at the Congress, and that sits till after four in the afternoon." Franklin was named to the Secret Committee of Congress, responsible for acquiring war supplies; and the Committee of Secret Correspondence, the fledgling State Department, whose aim was "corresponding with our friends in Great Britain, Ireland, and other parts of the world." Franklin met George Washington to learn what was needed, and since the government didn't have any credit, Franklin advanced another American commander £353 in gold from his personal funds.

In October 1775, Franklin talked with an impassioned English immigrant whom he had met in London, suggesting the Englishman write "a history of the present transactions." Indeed, the young man was already at work on such a project. He seems to have showed Franklin a draft in December. It was published as a 47-page pamphlet on January 10, 1776, and the author reportedly gave Franklin the first copy. The young man was Thomas Paine, and the pamphlet was *Common Sense*, whose eloquent call for independence electrified people throughout the colonies. In just a few months, *Common Sense* sold some 120,000 copies. With this single mighty blow, Paine banished efforts to achieve a reconciliation with Britain.

## The Declaration of Independence

On June 21, 1776, Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Robert Livingston (New York), and Roger Sherman (Connecticut)

were appointed to a committee for producing a declaration which would announce American independence. The committee asked Jefferson to draft it. Adams and Franklin read at least one version. Handwritten revisions suggest it was Franklin's idea to change Jefferson's description of "sacred and undeniable" truths to "self-evident." Jefferson had written "reduce them to arbitrary power," which Franklin changed to "reduce them under absolute despotism." Franklin changed Jefferson's phrase "deluge us in blood" to "destroy us." And he had a number of other changes that tightened up Jefferson's magnificent draft.

Jefferson later remembered that "I was sitting by Dr. Franklin, who perceived that I was not insensible to these mutilations. 'I have made it a rule,' said he, 'whenever in my power, to avoid becoming the draftsman of papers to be reviewed by a public body.'"

When time came to sign the Declaration on August 2, John Hancock, President of Congress reportedly remarked: "We must be unanimous; there must be no pulling different ways; we must all hang together." According to legend—not any contemporary accounts—Franklin urged that the Declaration be adopted unanimously, saying "we must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately."

With war underway, the best bet for help was France, which, having lost a war with Britain, would surely have wanted the British Empire to come apart. But the French were circumspect. They were at peace with Britain. The Americans were the underdogs, and nobody, including the French, wanted to publicly back a loser. King Louis XVI saw danger in supporting revolution against another monarchy. The Americans, for their part, felt some uneasiness seeking help from a king who claimed absolute power, and they didn't want the French to know how desperate they were. In addition, the British had spies everywhere, so it was likely that whatever the Americans did would soon be known in London.

In Paris, a private outfit, Rodrique Hortalez and Company, was set up to acquire and ship war supplies. The Secret Committee of Con-





*Benjamin Franklin being presented at the French court. Illustration by John Andrew (1856).*

gress thought they should have one of their own on the spot, so they dispatched Connecticut Congressman Silas Deane. But he wasn't able to move things along. "Unknown and unconnected in Europe," he acknowledged, "I was without personal credit, and the accounts of our misfortunes in America, with the confident assurances of the British Ministry by their ambassadors and partisans in Paris, that everything would be finished." When Franklin was asked if he would go to France, he noted his gout and other infirmities and reportedly replied, "I am old and good for nothing." But he agreed, then withdrew more than £3,000 from his bank and lent it to Congress. French intellectuals respected him for his pioneering experiments with electricity, and ordinary people knew that his lightning rods saved homes from fire. As John Adams put it: "there was scarcely a peasant or a citizen, a valet de chambre, coachman or footman, a lady's chambermaid or a scullion in a kitchen, who was not familiar with [Benjamin Franklin], and who did not consider him as a friend to human kind."

## Franklin in Paris

On October 26, 1776, Franklin secretly left Philadelphia with his grandsons William Temple Franklin and Benjamin Franklin Bache. They reached Paris on December 22. Franklin established his headquarters at Passy, a chateau in the town of Chaillot which was about one mile from Paris and seven miles from Versailles. The chateau belonged to Jacques Donatien Le Ray de Chaumont, an entrepreneur who had made money supplying uniforms to the French army. It was at Passy that Franklin gave dinner parties and cultivated business relationships. Among other things, he learned how to deal effectively with the French. "Telling them their commerce will be advantaged by our success, and that it is in their interest to help us, seems as much as to say, help us, and we shall not be obliged to you. Such indiscreet and improper language has been sometimes held here by some of our people, and produced no good effects."

Franklin discovered how to make an appealing impression. He described himself as "very plainly dressed, wearing my thin, gray

straight hair, that peeps out under my only coiffure, a fine fur cap, which comes down my forehead almost to my spectacles. Think how this must appear among the powdered heads of Paris!" Pictures of Franklin seemed to appear everywhere. Fashionable artists like Jean Honoré Fragonard did paintings of Franklin. His portrait was reproduced as engravings and aquatints. His likeness was on medallions, wall plaques, rings, bracelets, snuffboxes, and hats. He wrote his daughter, Sally: "These, with pictures, busts and prints (of which copies upon copies are spread everywhere), have made your father's face as well known as that of the moon."

On one occasion, Franklin was dining at a Paris restaurant and learned that Edward Gibbon, the British historian who chronicled ancient Rome's decline and fall, was there, too. Franklin invited Gibbon to his table, but Gibbon declined, saying that since he was loyal to George III, he wouldn't speak with a rebel. Franklin replied that if Gibbon ever wanted to write a history of Britain's decline and fall, he would provide "ample materials."

Despite all Franklin's savvy, he might not have accomplished much without evidence that the Americans could win. Washington provided that when he crossed the Delaware River on Christmas Day 1776 and won the Battle of Trenton, capturing over 900 fierce Hessian soldiers, mercenaries for the British. Franklin negotiated two treaties ("Alliance" and "Commerce") with France, giving important diplomatic recognition to the American republic. Franklin arranged a succession of shipments to America. That they included the most basic goods suggests how vulnerable America was. In one shipment, for instance: 164 brass cannon, 3,600 blankets, 4,000 tents, 4,000 dozen pairs of stockings, 8,750 pairs of shoes, 11,000 grenades, 20,000 pounds of lead, 161,000 pounds of gunpowder, 373,000 flints, and 514,000 musket balls. Altogether, Franklin secured some 26 million francs of military supplies.

Franklin handled many more tasks. For example, he met the Scottish-born naval captain John Paul Jones and encouraged his bold raids along Britain's coast, undermining British morale. Jones's flagship, the *Bon Homme*

*Richard*, honored the "Poor Richard" of Franklin's Almanack.

Franklin's phenomenal diplomacy clinched victory. In 1781, the British General Charles Cornwallis retreated from advancing forces led by George Washington and the French Marquis de Lafayette. Cornwallis brought his 8,000-man army to Yorktown, a Virginia coastal town where he expected relief from the mighty British navy. But the ships off Yorktown were commanded by the French Admiral François Joseph Paul de Grasse, and Cornwallis was cornered. He surrendered on October 19, 1781, essentially ending the Revolutionary War.

Franklin had worked wonders even though London learned about practically every move. His chief assistant at Passy was his friend Dr. Edward Bancroft, an American who worked as a British spy. Jonathan Dull, author of *Franklin the Diplomat*, remarked that "The American mission was so full of people stealing information it is surprising they did not trip over each other." British spies routinely opened Franklin's letters, and sometimes the spies were able to alert British ships which captured war materials bound for America.

Despite his hard work and health complaints, Franklin seems to have enjoyed himself. "You mention the Kindness of the French Ladies," he remarked to a friend. "This is the civilest Nation upon Earth. Your first Acquaintances endeavour to find out what you like, and they tell others. . . . Somebody, it seems, gave it out that I lov'd Ladies; and then every body presented me their Ladies . . . as to the kissing of Lips or Cheeks it is not the Mode here, the first, is reckon'd rude, & the other may rub off the Paint."

Franklin's work still wasn't done. Congress named him to a committee which would negotiate peace terms with Britain. Negotiations dragged on because the British refused to acknowledge American independence and sovereignty. Finally, after eight and a half years, missions accomplished, Franklin left Paris on July 12, 1785. He took five days to go the 146 miles to Le Havre, and he bid farewell to friends and well-wishers all along the way. He sailed for America with Jean-Antoine

Houdon, the sculptor who had done a noble bust of Franklin and would help immortalize Jefferson, Lafayette, and Washington.

Soon after arriving, Franklin declared: "I shall now be free of Politicks for the Rest of my Life." He spent time with his daughter and grandchildren. He planned an expansion of his house. His most recent inventions, at age 80, included an eight-foot-long gadget with a wooden "thumb" and "finger" at the end, to help a reader retrieve a book from a high shelf; a chair which, turned upside down, could serve as a step-stool; and a bathtub with a book rest.

## The Constitutional Convention

Franklin's last great opportunity came as the Constitutional Convention gathered in Philadelphia, in the spring of 1787. He was elected to the Philadelphia delegation. When Washington arrived on May 13, he stopped first at Franklin's Market Street house. The Convention met in the State House where the Second Continental Congress had met and where the Declaration of Independence had been signed.

When it looked like the Convention might collapse because of conflict between small states and big states (Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Virginia) over how they would be represented, Franklin suggested that subsequent sessions begin with a prayer. Although the proposal was rejected, it seemed to help calm down the participants. Congress named a "Grand Committee" in hopes of proposing a solution. Franklin, a member of it, recommended there be two legislative bodies—an idea which others had suggested—because this made possible a compromise: states would have equal representation in one legislative body (the Senate) and representation according to population in the other legislative body (the House of Representatives), with the House having the power to originate money bills. This "Great Compromise" assured the small states that their interests would be protected, and they were more willing to compromise on other issues, helping to move the proceedings forward.

Finally, Franklin made a motion that the Constitution be adopted. "When you assem-

ble a number of men to have the advantage of their joint wisdom," he reflected, "you inevitably assemble with those men, all their prejudices, their passions, their errors of opinions, their local interests, and their selfish views. From such an assembly can a perfect production be expected? It therefore astonishes me, Sir, to find this system approaching so near to perfection as it does. . . . On the whole, Sir, I cannot help expressing a wish that every member of the Convention who may still have objections to it, would with me, on this occasion doubt a little of his own infallibility, and to make manifest our unanimity, put his name to this instrument."

In late 1787, Franklin had a bad fall going down steps to his garden, and he suffered excruciating pain from a kidney stone. He wrote his will and resumed work on his autobiography. He corresponded with friends. George Washington wrote: "As long as I retain my memory, you will be thought of with respect, veneration and affection." Franklin declared that the new Constitution looked like it might last, but "in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes." As the French Revolution exploded across the Atlantic, Franklin wrote his friend David Hartley: "God grant that not only the love of liberty, but a thorough knowledge of the rights of man, may pervade all the nations of the earth, so that a philosopher may set his foot anywhere on its surface, and say, 'This is my country.'"

In March 1790, Thomas Jefferson visited him and reported: "I found him in bed where he remains almost constantly. He had been clear of pain for some days and was cheerful & in good spirits. . . . He is much emaciated. I pressed him to continue the narration of his life, & perhaps he will." Franklin entrusted Jefferson—the only one outside his family—with a copy of some chapters from his *Autobiography*. The last letter Franklin ever wrote, nine days before his death, was to Jefferson.

Franklin developed a fever and complained about pain on the left side of his chest. His daughter expressed the hope that he would live for quite a while, but he replied: "I hope not. A dying man can do nothing easy." Then a lung abscess burst, and breathing became

ever more difficult. He died on April 17, 1790, about 11:00 at night. He was 84. Four days later, a funeral procession began at the State House, and he was buried at Christ Church cemetery. Some 20,000 people paid their respects, including officials, militia men, scientists, merchants, bankers, teachers, printers, apprentices, and others whose lives were touched by the extraordinary enterprising spirit of Benjamin Franklin.

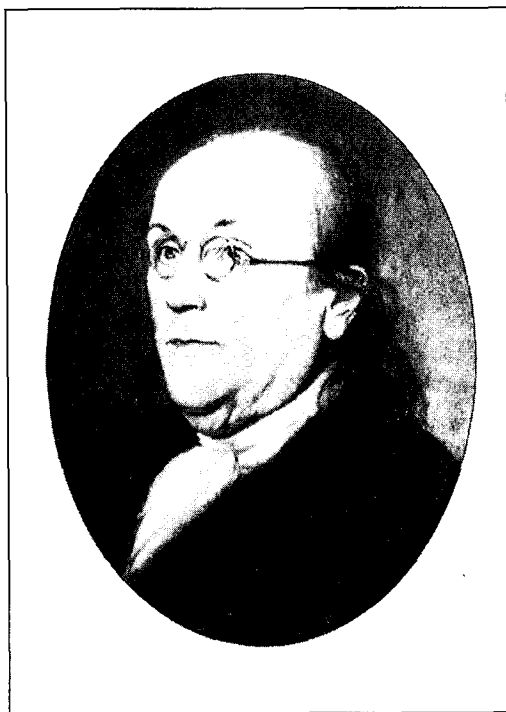
He had written his wry epitaph long ago: "B. Franklin, Printer; like the Cover of an old Book, Its Contents torn out, And stript of its lettering and Gilding, Lies here, Food for Worms. But the Work shall not be wholly lost, For it will, as he believ'd, appear once more, In a new & more perfect Edition, Corrected and amended By the Author."

John Adams, though a Franklin critic, acknowledged his "reputation was more universal than that of Leibnitz and Newton, Frederick or Voltaire, and his character more beloved and esteemed than any or all of them." In Paris, Comte de Mirabeau, the orator and revolutionary leader, told the French National Assembly: "Franklin is dead—he has returned to the bosom of God—the genius who has liberated America, and shed over Europe the torrents of his light."

## Franklin's *Autobiography*

Part One of Franklin's *Autobiography*—a pirated French edition—was published in 1791. Then came two English editions. There were 14 reprintings before 1800. Franklin's selected works, including the *Autobiography*, weren't published until 1817 because of delays by the aimless William Temple Franklin, who had inherited his grandfather's manuscripts. The rest of Franklin's manuscripts were stored in a stable and eventually recovered by the American Philosophical Society. John Adams expressed appreciation for what was available, because "there is scarce a scratch of his Pen that is not worth preserving."

The *Autobiography* had many factual errors, since Franklin recalled events years after they happened. The story only went up to 1760. Franklin revealed little about his feelings. But the book appealed to people because he



*Benjamin Franklin*

chronicled his failures as well as his successes, and he identified principles for building strong character. He wrote in a refreshingly plainspoken manner.

Franklin, noted American historian Carl Becker, was "a true child of the Enlightenment, not indeed of the school of Rousseau, but of Defoe and Pope and Swift, of Fontenelle and Montesquieu and Voltaire. He spoke their language, although with a homely accent, a tang of the soil, that bears witness to his lowly and provincial origin. . . . He accepted without question and expressed without effort all the characteristic ideas and prepossessions of the century . . . its healthy, clarifying skepticism; its passion for freedom and its humane sympathies; its preoccupation with the world that is evident to the senses; its profound faith in common sense, in the efficacy of Reason for the solution of human problems and the advancement of human welfare."

The book had significant impact around the world. Inspired by Franklin, the great German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe organized a "Friday Club" whose aims and practices were similar to Franklin's Junto.



Franklin inspired Simón Bolívar and José de San Martín, who helped people in South America achieve independence. Franklin's *Autobiography* was a hit in Japan, where Fukuzawa Yukichi and other thinkers promoted his principles, which inspired entrepreneurs. The Florentine painter Gaspero Barbera published an Italian translation, explaining: "At the age of 35 I was a lost man. . . . I read again and again the *Autobiography* of Franklin, and became enamoured of his ideas and principles to such a degree that to them I ascribe my moral regeneration. . . . Now, at the age of fifty-one, I am healthy, cheerful and rich."

During the heyday of American individualism, Franklin's story was taken up by educators whose books sold in the tens of millions. For instance, drawing on the *Autobiography*, Noah Webster included an 11-page account of Franklin's life in his *Biography For the Use of Schools* (1830). Peter Parley wrote a *Life of Benjamin Franklin* (1832). William Holmes McGuffey included selections from the *Autobiography* in his enormously popular *Readers*.

By the 1850s, the *Autobiography* had been reprinted almost 100 times. Between 1860 and 1890, Franklin was reportedly the most popular subject for American biographers. Many successful Americans testified about the impact Franklin had on their lives. The *Autobiography* inspired James Harper to leave his Long Island farm and launch what became one of America's most venerable publishing houses (now HarperCollins). "Yes, sir," Harper told a friend, "the basis on which we commenced was *character, not capital*"—and he had an artist paint a profile of Franklin into his own portrait. Horace Greeley, a poor boy who became the famous editor of the *New York Tribune*, declared in 1862: "Of the men whom the world currently terms Self-Made—that is, who severally fought their life-battles without the aid of inherited wealth, or family honors, or educational advantages, perhaps our American Franklin stands highest in the civilized world's regard."

The *Autobiography* inspired Thomas Mellon to leave his farm for business; he became a banker and made his family fortune. "I

regard the reading of Franklin's *Autobiography* as the turning point of my life," he wrote. "Here was Franklin, poorer than myself, who by industry, thrift and frugality had become learned and wise, and elevated to wealth and fame." The *Autobiography* inspired steel entrepreneur Andrew Carnegie. Harvard University President Jared Sparks told how the *Autobiography* "first roused my mental energies . . . prompted me to resolutions, and gave me strength to adhere to them. . . . It taught me that circumstances have not a sovereign control over the mind."

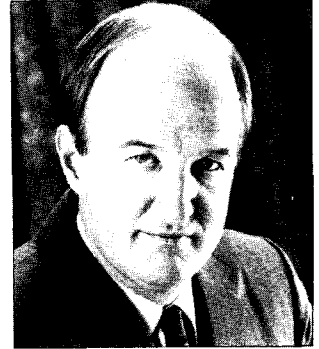
Mark Twain noted Franklin's influence on millions. Savings banks across America were named after Franklin. Altogether, reported American historian Clinton Rossiter, Franklin's *Autobiography* has been "translated and retranslated into a dozen languages, printed and reprinted in hundreds of editions, read and reread by millions of people, especially by young and impressionable Americans. The influence of these few hundred pages has been matched by that of no other American book."

But as individualism fell out of fashion, intellectuals belittled personal responsibility and self-help. For instance, novelist D.H. Lawrence in 1923: "The soul of man is a dark vast forest, with wild life in it. Think of Benjamin fencing it off! . . . He made himself a list of virtues, which he trotted inside like a gray nag in a paddock. . . . Middle-sized, sturdy, snuff-coloured Franklin. . . . I do not like him." In recent decades, some professors focused on his personality, claiming the *Autobiography* was an elaborate pose, covering up the allegedly "hidden" Franklin—complex, elusive, secretive, intriguing. One professor talked about Franklin's "dark side."

But none of the critics deny that Benjamin Franklin achieved stupendous things. He championed personal responsibility, intellectual curiosity, honesty, persistence, and thrift—principles that have helped people everywhere lift themselves up. He nurtured an entrepreneurial culture which creates opportunity and hope through peaceful cooperation. He affirmed that by improving yourself and helping your neighbors you can make a free society succeed. His most glorious invention was—and is—the American dream. □



## Free Marketers Miss Opportunity at AEA Meetings



“People saved more and we had a recession in 1990.”

—Olivier Blanchard

“A reduction in the federal deficit is short-term expansionary.”

—Alan Blinder

**T**he two statements above, made on January 7, 1997, at the American Economic Association meetings in New Orleans, contrast the “old” and the “new” visions of economic policy.

MIT professor Olivier Blanchard, reflecting old-style Keynesian thinking, blamed the 1990–1991 recession on excessive saving instead of higher taxes and tight money.

Alan Blinder, Princeton economist and former Fed official, represented new classical thinking when he declared that increased deficit spending was bad for the economy and that a deliberate policy of cutting the deficit was expansionary because it would mean a decline in interest rates. Keynes must be turning over in his grave!

Both statements were made at a well-attended meeting titled, “Is there a core of practical macroeconomics that we should all believe?” The participants were all mainstream economists from established institu-

tions, yet they could not agree on many fundamental issues. Blanchard (MIT) was anti-saving and John Taylor (Stanford) was pro-saving. Some said the Phillips trade-off between inflation and unemployment was real, others said it was chimera. Supply-side economics was not represented. No one advocated tax reduction in an age of high tax burdens.

The debate could have been much more lively if the organizers had invited economists from outside the mainstream, such as Marxists and Austrians. But in most cases unorthodox thinkers are not invited to the sessions sponsored by the AEA. What to do? Most outcasts offer their own programs, side by side with the regular AEA sessions.

### Where Were the Free-Market Advocates?

The Marxists are particularly well organized—the Union for Radical Political Economists sponsored over 30 sessions of their own. The “Growth and Gender” session was especially unprecedented: All five members of the panel were from the University of Utah’s economics department, which has apparently been taken over by Marxists. Imagine, a Marxist revolution in the center of conservative Utah!

Why the free-market schools don’t offer their own agenda at these national meetings is a mystery. The Society for the Development of Austrian Economics has its own program at the annual meetings of the Southern Eco-

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