

The Political Theory of Benjamin Franklin

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*The Political Theory of  
Benjamin Franklin*

CAN any new thing be written of Benjamin Franklin? Is there a corner of his magnificent mind or an aspect of his towering influence that is not the most familiar public property? He has had a dozen or more notable biographers and a legion of faithful investigators of one or another of his activities and interests.<sup>1</sup> In his own writings, public as well as private, he examined himself with discrimination and revealed himself with candor.<sup>2</sup>

Yet much remains to be hypothesized and verified in what Carl Van Doren liked to call the "Franklin science." We need a new and revised edition of his complete writings,<sup>3</sup> an expanded bibliography, a scientific biography, additional calendars of his papers (which are spread throughout the western world), and a Franklin dictionary. We

<sup>1</sup> No attempt will be made here to give even a fragmentary bibliography of works by and about Franklin. See the card catalogue of any convenient library, as well as Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1938), 785-788; Carl Becker, *Benjamin Franklin* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1946), 41-42; R. E. Spiller, et al., eds., *Literary History of the United States* (New York, 1948), III, 507-515; P. L. Ford, *Franklin Bibliography* (Brooklyn, N. Y., 1889); F. L. Mott and C. E. Jorgenson, *Benjamin Franklin, Representative Selections* (New York, 1936), cli-clxxxiii.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Van Doren, ed., *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiographical Writings* (New York, 1948).

<sup>3</sup> The best editions now available are Jared Sparks, *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, 10 vols. (Boston, 1840), to be cited as *Works*; and A. H. Smyth, *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, 10 vols. (New York, 1905-1907), to be cited as *Writings*.

need a fuller biography than Van Doren's, something "half again as long," as Van Doren himself promised not long before his death<sup>4</sup>; we need a fuller one than that, something with the sweep and detail of the Freeman *Washington*. And certainly we can expect and welcome a constant flow of articles and monographs that will question and perhaps revise some of the accepted interpretations of Franklin's special accomplishments and talents.

This article proposes to do exactly that. Convinced that the literature on Franklin's political theory falls well below the high level of analysis reached by the literature on his religion, scientific achievements, diplomacy, personal life, and political career, I should like to re-examine this important part of his thought, paying particular attention to those democratic ideas he expressed and acted upon during his and America's colonial period. I have no intention of pronouncing even a single final judgment on Franklin's political theory, but I do think it essential to "question and perhaps revise" certain assumptions about this aspect of his many-sided philosophy.

The pattern of Franklin's political theory is as perplexing as it is intriguing, as elusive as it is important. He was an able and productive political pamphleteer. He reflected with peculiar accuracy the changing political moods of eighteenth-century America, and was looked upon as the representative colonial by the keenest observers of his time. He helped to introduce to the American mind four or five fundamental assumptions about government and society. Yet he was never in the ordinary sense a theorist or philosopher in the field of political science.

The proof of this startling observation lies in Franklin's own writings: The sum total of his strictly philosophical musings about government and politics would fill, quite literally, about two printed pages. He wrote authoritatively about scores of events and problems that had persuaded men far less speculative than he to philosophize at length about the nature and purpose of government, but his arguments were descriptive, statistical, propagandistic and totally lacking in any appeal to fundamentals.<sup>5</sup> He was the one American patriot

<sup>4</sup> Carl Van Doren, *et al.*, *Meet Dr. Franklin* (Philadelphia, 1943), 223.

<sup>5</sup> The most characteristic examples are the eleven letters entitled "The Colonist's Advocate" (1770), printed in V. W. Crane, *Benjamin Franklin's Letters to the Press, 1758-1775* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1950), 167-209.

to write influentially about the events of 1763–1776 without calling upon natural law, the rights of man, and the social contract.

If ever Franklin expressed a clear and conscious thought on such matters as the origin of government or the nature of authority, the research for this article, which has led through a half-dozen libraries and several hundred letters, pamphlets, and rough scribblings, has been unable to find it. He seems to have been constitutionally incapable of the kind of writing done by Williams, Wise, Mayhew, Otis, and almost every other political actor in colonial or revolutionary America. If just one small trickle of theory had leaked through somewhere out of the vast structure of his political writings, we might rejoice to have found the sure source of his ideas. The amazing fact that he never once permitted this to happen leaves us wondering if perhaps this refusal to philosophize was not the result of a calculated, rigidly observed rule of political argument.

His early and unhappy venture into speculation about the cosmos could well have conditioned his subsequent thinking about politics. “The great uncertainty I found in metaphysical reasonings disgusted me, and I quitted that kind of reading and study for others more satisfactory.”<sup>6</sup> The nature of his task should also be remembered: The bulk of his political arguments consisted of letters to the English press, not speeches to the American assemblies; he could hardly have rung the changes on natural rights and revolution in *The London Chronicle* or *Public Advertiser*. And certainly one piece like his *Rules by which a Great Empire may be reduced to a Small One*<sup>7</sup> was worth a hundred passionate appeals to God and nature in the attempt to sway British opinion. In any case, there is no acceptable explanation why Benjamin Franklin, of all people, should have been one of the least philosophical statesmen in American history.

Were the person under analysis anyone but Franklin, this article would end here, or rather would never have been begun. Yet we are dealing with the great democrat of colonial America, and somehow we must wring from his practical arguments the political faith that he

<sup>6</sup> To Benjamin Vaughan, Nov. 9, 1779, *Writings*, VII, 412. Even Franklin’s rough drafts and memoranda—for example, those preserved in the American Philosophical Society (APS)—are wholly practical and unspeculative in character. Franklin Papers, Vol. 50, Pt. 1, fols. 7–9, 13; Pt. 2, fols. 4, 9–12, 24, 31, 46, 48, 50, 51, APS.

<sup>7</sup> *Writings*, VI, 127–137. This essay was first printed in *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, September, 1773.

doggedly refused to make articulate. One method of accomplishing this obstinate feat is to describe Franklin's beliefs as other men saw them. This is a technique not ordinarily to be trusted, but in a case like this it is the only alternative to no technique at all. And we have reasonable evidence, drawn particularly from Franklin's consistent actions in support of the popular cause, that he did indeed espouse the principles ascribed to him by friend and foe. These principles may be reduced to two major headings: the teachings of John Locke and radical Whiggery.

It is impossible to estimate accurately the extent of Franklin's dedication to the philosophy of natural law and natural rights. As a scientist, skeptic, and unprejudiced student of universal history, he could not have missed the inconsistencies and historical distortions in Locke's *Second Treatise*. On the other hand, his pragmatic mind, which was always more concerned with the effects of a political philosophy than with its logic or symmetry, would have been the first to recognize the usefulness to the popular cause of a system based so squarely on the notion of government by the consent of the governed. Among the bits of evidence that Franklin accepted the dominant theory of his time and class are these: He studied and admired "the great Mr. Locke's" philosophical writings,<sup>8</sup> and was hardly less devoted to Algernon Sidney<sup>9</sup>; as a member of the Committee of Five he read over and endorsed Jefferson's "rough draft" of the Declaration of Independence<sup>10</sup>; and he was widely credited, especially in England, with the authorship of *Common Sense*, which Paine had published anonymously in Philadelphia. It was even rumored that the Queen had caught the Prince of Wales red-handed with "Dr. Franklin's pamphlet *Common Sense*."<sup>11</sup>

Scattered through Franklin's pamphlets, letters, and notes are other witnesses to his tacit acceptance of Locke's renowned theory, phrases and sentences that glimmer here and there in the great gray mass of his practical arguments. To quote these out of context would be unfair to Franklin, and indeed quite misleading. It must therefore

<sup>8</sup> *Writings*, I, 179, 243; II, 387 (note).

<sup>9</sup> Franklin's Ramsay, 28, 52 (see below, Note 31).

<sup>10</sup> Julian Boyd, *The Declaration of Independence* (Princeton, 1945), 16 ff., and references there cited.

<sup>11</sup> *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, Jan. 11, 1777.

suffice to state the general impression they leave: that Franklin endorsed as useful doctrines the state of nature (in which all men are free and equal),<sup>12</sup> the social contract,<sup>13</sup> natural law, natural rights (including “life, liberty, and property,” as well as freedom of inquiry, expression, petition, religion and migration),<sup>14</sup> and the happiness and safety of the people as the purpose of government. As the most conspicuous revolutionary of 1776 Franklin could hardly have doubted the rights of resistance and revolution, but we may search his writings in vain for any clear statement of this doctrine.<sup>15</sup>

The only elements in the natural rights-natural law theory that Franklin seems to have enlarged upon were property and equality. Although in general he shared the popular view of the sanctity of property—“Does not *every Man’s Feelings* Declare that his Property is not to be taken from him without his Consent?”<sup>16</sup>—he seems to have entertained a somewhat more radical, socially minded view of the importance of any one man’s possessions in relation to the commonweal. The Franklin touch is manifest in this passage:

All Property, indeed, except the Savage’s temporary Cabin, his Bow, his Matchcoat, and other little Acquisitions, absolutely necessary for his Subsistence, seems to me to be the Creature of public Convention. Hence the Public has the Right of Regulating Descents, and all other Conveyances of Property, and even of limiting the Quantity and the Uses of it. All the Property that is necessary to a Man, for the Conservation of the Individual and the Propagation of the Species, is his natural Right, which none can justly deprive him of: But all Property superfluous to such purposes is the Property of the Publick, who, by their Laws, have created it, and who may therefore by other Laws dispose of it, whenever the Welfare of the Publick shall demand such Disposition. He that does not like civil Society on these Terms, let him retire and live among Savages. He can have no right to the benefits of Society, who will not pay his Club towards the Support of it.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Franklin’s Ramsay, 8, 10, 14; Franklin’s Wheelock, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Franklin’s Ramsay, 9, 10, 15, 51–54.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 51–52; “I think People should be left at Liberty to go where they can be happiest,” Franklin to Jonathan Shipley, Mar. 10, 1774, Yale Library.

<sup>15</sup> For glimpses of the Lockean theory in his published writings, see *Writings*, II, 25–28, 293; VI, 260, 298; IX, 293; X, 59–60, 72; *Works*, II, 323, 556; Crane, *Letters to the Press*, 55–56, 169. For glimpses in the marginalia, see Franklin’s *Good Humour*, 18–20; Franklin’s Ramsay, 8–10, 15, 24, 28, 51–52.

<sup>16</sup> Franklin’s Ramsay, 27.

<sup>17</sup> To Robert Morris, Dec. 25, 1783, *Writings*, IX, 138.

Franklin's belief in equality was the obverse of his well-known impatience with "places, pensions, and peerages,"<sup>18</sup> with the stupidity and injustice of legalized inequalities of any description.<sup>19</sup> His thoughts on this subject were expressed as usual in extremely untheoretical language, but occasionally a sentence appears in the progress of his argument that belies a belief in equality as the key principle of organization of free society. Franklin came to this belief gradually, for in his earlier years he flirted with the doctrine of the stake-in-society. In the end his naturally democratic sympathies triumphed resoundingly. Near the close of his life, in arguing against property as a qualification for the suffrage, he had this to say to the proponents of aristocracy:

The Combinations of Civil Society are not like those of a Set of Merchants, who club their Property in different Proportions for Building and Freighting a Ship, and may therefore have some Right to vote in the Disposition of the Voyage in a greater or less Degree according to their respective Contributions; but the important ends of Civil Society, and the personal Securities of Life and Liberty, these remain the same in every Member of the society; and the poorest continues to have an equal Claim to them with the most opulent, whatever Difference Time, Chance, or Industry may occasion in their Circumstances.<sup>20</sup>

In general, then, it is safe to say that Franklin believed in the natural rights-natural law philosophy as much as he could believe in any body of doctrine, and that he subscribed with extra fervor to the basic Lockean belief in "a Society in which the Ruling Power is circumscribed by previous Laws or Agreements."<sup>21</sup> Like all the men of his time he put his faith in limited government, government in which the rulers were the servants of the people.<sup>22</sup>

In considering Franklin a radical Whig the men of his time were recognizing his kinship with scores of other representatives of the popular party in the colonial assemblies. With Pitt and King William

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, VII, 172.

<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.*, IX, 161-168, for his low opinion of the Cincinnati and their abortive attempt to "form an Order of *hereditary Knights*, in direct opposition to the solemnly declared Sense of their Country." See also *ibid.*, VI, 371.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, X, 59-60; see also VI, 291.

<sup>21</sup> Franklin's Ramsay, 15.

<sup>22</sup> See especially his whimsical speech to the Convention of 1787, in Max Farrand, *The Records of the Federal Convention* (New Haven, Conn., 1911), II, 120, as well as Franklin's Ramsay, 33-34.

as their heroes, the Glorious Revolution as their golden age, and the uncorrupted British Constitution as the noblest of all governmental systems,<sup>23</sup> the colonial Whigs were preparing the ground in which American democracy was to flourish. The battle cry of the good Whig, in the colonies as in England, was "Liberty!"—by which he meant constitutionalism, representation, government by "the people" (those who had some property), "the rights of Englishmen,"<sup>24</sup> and a system of "balanced government" in which the legislature was actually dominant. Through most of his life, indeed through all of it as a colonial, Franklin was in the van of the liberty-loving Whigs, which explains his hope to settle his colony's constitution "firmly on the Foundations of Equity and English Liberty."<sup>25</sup> Not all of the colonial Whigs—Franklin's friend Joseph Galloway, for example—were able to make the transition to independence, fewer still from there to democracy. Franklin seems to have had no trouble. He was a notable specimen of that uncommon species, the man who grows more democratic with age, fame, respectability, and the gout.

Among Franklin's literary remains was a printed paper, endorsed in his hand with the statement, "Some Good Whig Principles." In point of fact these principles push well beyond sound Whiggery into radical country, which explains why he found them especially "good." These could just as easily have been his own words as he arrived in the mother country in 1764.

It is declared,

First, That the government of this realm, and the making of laws for the same, ought to be lodged in the hands of King, Lords of Parliament, and Representatives of *the whole body* of the freemen of this realm.

Secondly, That *every man* of the commonalty (excepting infants, insane persons, and criminals) is, of common right, and by the laws of God, a *freeman*, and entitled to the free enjoyment of *liberty*.

Thirdly, That liberty, or freedom, consists in having *an actual share* in the appointment of those who frame the laws, and who are to be the guardians of every man's life, property, and peace; for the *all* of one man

<sup>23</sup> *Writings*, V, 133; Franklin Papers, Vol. 50, Pt. 1, fols. 4b, 8, 11, APS.

<sup>24</sup> For examples of Franklin's concern for English rights, see *Writings*, III, 233; V, 80–81; Crane, *Letters to the Press*, 10–11, 44, 56, 112, 174. And see generally Conyers Read, "The English Elements in Benjamin Franklin," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (PMHB), LXIV (1940), 314–330.

<sup>25</sup> To Galloway, June 10, 1758, Yale Library.



is as dear to him as the *all* of another; and the poor man has an *equal* right, but *more* need, to have representatives in the legislature than the rich one.

Fourthly, That they who have *no* voice nor vote in the electing of representatives, *do not enjoy* liberty; but are absolutely *enslaved* to those who have votes. . . .

And, sixthly and lastly, . . . that it is *the right* of the commonalty of this realm to elect a *new* House of Commons once in *every year*, according to the ancient and sacred laws of the land. . . .<sup>26</sup>

Two more preliminary observations, and we shall be ready to outline Franklin's special contributions to the American democratic tradition. The first touches upon his habits of thought. The methods Franklin employed in weighing political issues were hardly less significant than the decisions he reached. We will have a good deal less trouble with his political mind if we will remember that he was a pragmatist, insisting that all ideas be judged by their effects; a scientist, distrusting dogma and prizing free inquiry; a skeptic, doubting all certainty and never "wholly committed" to any cause or truth<sup>27</sup>; and a generalist, ranging through all disciplines and integrating them masterfully into one grand comprehension of human knowledge.

The second point concerns the location of his recorded ideas. For the most part they are the same as for the other great figures of his time, who wrote copiously, influentially, and with absolutely no system. Pamphlets on current issues, letters to the press,<sup>28</sup> private correspondence, and formal papers are the categories of authorship in which his contributions are to be sought.<sup>29</sup> Hardly less important are the so-called "marginalia," notes made by Franklin in the margins of his copies of other men's pamphlets. Some of these notes are testimony to a universal human urge, the urge to scribble "This Wiseacre," "No!," "Childish," "All mere Quibbling," and "A Falsity!" alongside the brash paragraphs of enemy pamphleteers. Most of them, however, were written in a serious, searching vein, for

<sup>26</sup> *Writings*, X, 130-131; see also VI, 128, 214-215. Franklin's favorite club in London was known as the "Honest Whigs." Van Doren, *Franklin*, 421-422.

<sup>27</sup> Becker, *Franklin*, 35.

<sup>28</sup> It is to this problem that Verner W. Crane has devoted years of patient labor. The end result, *Benjamin Franklin's Letters to the Press, 1758-1775*, is a triumph in the Franklin science.

<sup>29</sup> Under the last heading I would include the thoroughly prepared "Examination of Dr. Benjamin Franklin, Etc., in the British House of Commons," *Writings*, IV, 412-448.

they were one of his favorite methods of preparing retorts to the press. Although his most important editor, Albert H. Smyth, considered these scribblings "crude and fragmentary," "never intended for publication," and therefore not worth printing,<sup>30</sup> other scholars have valued them highly. These precious indications, in Franklin's own hand, of his innermost thoughts on the great issues of the 1760's are preserved in the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, the Yale Library, the Athenaeum of Philadelphia, and The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. They are a unique source of his political ideas.<sup>31</sup>

Franklin's specific contributions to the aggregate of libertarian principles inherited by the revolutionary generation were a patchwork of utility, reason, and warm human sympathy. Some of his offerings were directly and consciously bestowed on his fellow citizens. Some were working principles of method and attitude that he was content to practice and to let other men imitate or spin out into theories of democracy. All were essential ingredients of the new way of life and thought that he represented so magnificently before the rulers and people of Europe. Political pragmatism, conciliation and compromise, freedom of speech and press, economic individualism, and federalism were the essentials of American democracy to which Franklin devoted special attention.

### *Political pragmatism*

Pragmatism as a rule of conscious political action has never had a more eminent exponent than Benjamin Franklin.<sup>32</sup> There were great pragmatists before this greatest of pragmatists. The political history

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, V.

<sup>31</sup> Fragments of the marginalia are in *Works*, IV, 206-232, 281-301; *Writings*, X, 234-240; *PMHB*, XXV (1901), 307-322, 516-526, and XXVI (1902), 81-90, 255-264; American Antiquarian Society, *Proceedings*, XXXIV (New Series), 217-218. The pamphlets in which the most revealing marginalia are to be found are 1) *The Claim of the Colonies to an Exemption from Internal Taxes* (London, 1765); 2) *Good Humour: or, a Way with the Colonies* (London, 1766); 3) Allen Ramsay, *Thoughts on the Origin and Nature of Government* (London, 1769); 4) Matthew Wheelock, *Reflections Moral and Political on Great Britain and her Colonies* (London, 1770). Item 1 is in the New York Public Library, item 2 (in photostat) in the Yale Library, items 3 and 4 in the Library of Congress. They are cited here as Franklin's *Claim of the Colonies*, Franklin's *Good Humour*, Franklin's Ramsay, and Franklin's Wheelock.

<sup>32</sup> See particularly the excellent chapter, "Benjamin Franklin: Student of Life," contributed by R. E. Spiller to *Meet Dr. Franklin*, 83-103.

of colonial America was written by men who had “the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, ‘categories,’ supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.”<sup>33</sup> But in Franklin’s life and political arguments this method became an acknowledged, if yet nameless, American fundamental. William James, in his memorable lectures on pragmatism in 1906 and 1907, described this philosophy as “a new name for some old ways of thinking.” Franklin might have been perplexed by the label, but he would certainly have recognized his own ways of thinking. No man could have been less concerned with origins and first principles, or more concerned with consequences and facts. The character of his natural science left its mark on his political science. He was perhaps the most thoroughgoing utilitarian America has produced.

Franklin’s political pragmatism was simply one influential expression of his general attitude toward life and its problems. He was not a political philosopher; he was not a philosopher at all. He was a man prepared to investigate and discuss every principle and institution known to the human race, but only in the most practical and un-speculative terms. He limited his own thought process to the one devastating question: *Does it work?*, or more exactly, *Does it work well?* Most men who call themselves pragmatists, especially in politics, examine the evidence of consequences and facts from a pre-determined observation post constructed out of strongly held articles of faith. They are pragmatists within limits, within a context that itself may not be put to the test and may well be an irrational inheritance or a rationalized faith. Not so Franklin, who seemed willing to subject even his most basic beliefs, if they could be called that, to the test of experience. He was a democrat, radical Whig, and friend of liberty because democracy, Whiggery, and liberty had demonstrated themselves to his uncommitted mind to be the best practical solutions to the problems facing men in society. He had proved and found solid the very context of his pragmatism.

Perhaps the most convincing example of Franklin’s consistent devotion to political pragmatism was his well-known attitude on the usefulness of organized religion. Himself a pagan skeptic with no need for ministerial intervention, he nevertheless had pronounced and

<sup>33</sup> William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York, 1907), 54–55.

favorable views of the value of religion to a free and stable society. He had decided, after much observation in Boston and Philadelphia, that one of the essentials of self-government was a high level of public morality. He had decided further that such a condition of public morality was largely the product of organized religion. The churches and sects of New England and the middle colonies had helped create a collective state of mind conducive to habits of self-reliance and self-government. It had nourished the way of life that his other observations had already taught him to be the most blessed for the average man. Organized religion had “worked,” and worked well, in the colonies. It must therefore be supported, even by the skeptic. Franklin went to church, when he went to church, because it was “decent and proper,” not because he believed. In his proposals that led to the founding of the Academy of Philadelphia, he advocated the teaching of history because it would “also afford frequent Opportunities of showing the Necessity of a *Publick Religion*, from its Usefulness to the Publick; the Advantage of a Religious Character among private Persons; the Mischiefs of Superstition, etc., and the Excellency of the CHRISTIAN RELIGION above all others antient or modern.”<sup>34</sup> He had abandoned logical deism because “this doctrine, though it might be true, was not very useful.” He turned back to give support to Christianity because this doctrine, though it might be untrue, was highly indispensable to his kind of society.

Education, too, was important because useful. Franklin’s faith in education had a dozen outlets. The American Philosophical Society, The Library Company, the University of Pennsylvania, and the Franklin Funds of Boston and Philadelphia are present-day reminders of his high regard for formal and informal education of all classes, ages, and conditions of men. The famous *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania* (1749)<sup>35</sup> are utilitarian to the core. The modern reader cannot suppress the pleasant suspicion that Franklin’s ideal academy would be geared to turn out the maximum number of young Franklins.

<sup>34</sup> *Writings*, II, 393. For other examples of his regard for the usefulness of religion, see J. M. Stifler, *The Religion of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1925), 8, 15, 17, 40, 118; *Writings*, IX, 521.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 386–396; also III, 16–17; X, 9–32. See generally Thomas Woody, *Educational Views of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1931).

The proprietary government of Pennsylvania, the target of his early popularism, was likewise put to the test, but found wanting. Franklin could easily have based his mistrust of this system on principle alone, but preferred to condemn it for its harmful effects. In a characteristic passage from the aptly titled *Cool Thoughts on the Present Situation* (1764), he launched this pragmatic attack on the proprietary system:

Considering all Circumstances, I am at length inclin'd to think, that the Cause of these miserable Contentions is not to be sought for merely in the Depravity and Selfishness of human Minds. . . . I suspect therefore, that the Cause is radical, interwoven in the Constitution, and so become of the very Nature, of Proprietary Governments; and will therefore produce its Effects, as long as such Governments continue. And, as some Physicians say, every Animal Body brings into the World among its original Stamina the Seeds of that Disease that shall finally produce its Dissolution; so the Political Body of a Proprietary Government, contains those convulsive Principles that will at length destroy it.

I may not be Philosopher enough to develop those Principles, nor would this Letter afford me Room, if I had Abilities, for such a Discussion. The *Fact* seems sufficient for our Purpose, and the *Fact* is notorious, that such Contentions have been in all Proprietary Governments, and have brought, or are now bringing, them all to a Conclusion.<sup>36</sup>

A final example of Franklin's political pragmatism was his oft-repeated warning of the unworkability of laws that outrage a people's fundamental opinions. This was the sort of argument—calling attention to consequences rather than constitutional rights—with which he attempted to dissuade the advocates of harsh measures for the colonies. He even printed small cards describing “The Result of England's Persistence in Her Policy Towards the Colonies.”

History affords us many instances of the ruin of states, by the prosecution of measures ill suited to the temper and genius of their people. The ordaining of laws in favour of *one* part of the nation, to the prejudice and oppression of *another*, is certainly the most erroneous and mistaken policy. An *equal* dispensation of protection, rights, privileges, and advantages, is what every part is entitled to, and ought to enjoy; it being a matter of no moment to the state, whether a subject grows rich and flourishing on the Thames or the Ohio, in Edinburgh or Dublin. These measures never fail to create great and violent jealousies and animosities between the people favoured and the

<sup>36</sup> *Writings*, IV, 228–229.

people oppressed; whence a total separation of affections, interests, political obligations, and all manner of connexions, necessarily ensue, by which the whole state is weakened, and perhaps ruined for ever!<sup>37</sup>

Franklin's supremely practical observation, "the *Fact* seems sufficient for our Purpose, and the *Fact* is notorious," has become a major working principle of this race of pragmatists, and to him and his popular writings must go at least some of the credit.

### *Conciliation and compromise*

Franklin placed extraordinary value in the spirit and techniques of conciliation and compromise. By nature and experience he was disposed to seek peace and harmony in whatever controversy he might have wandered into by design or accident. His nature was skeptical and undogmatic; he could even doubt his own opinions. The benign speech that James Wilson delivered for him on the last day of the Convention of 1787 was characteristic of a lifetime of active political argument.

I confess that I do not entirely approve of this Constitution at present, but Sir, I am not sure I shall never approve it: For having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged, by better information or fuller consideration, to change opinions even on important subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be otherwise. It is therefore that the older I grow the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment, and to pay more respect to the judgment of others. Most men indeed as well as most sects in religion, think themselves in possession of all truth, and that wherever others differ from them it is so far error. Steele, a Protestant, in a dedication tells the Pope, that the only difference between our two churches in their opinions of the certainty of their doctrine, is, the Romish Church is infallible, and the Church of England is never in the wrong. But tho' many private persons think almost as highly of their own infallibility as of that of their Sect, few express it so naturally as a certain French lady, who in a little dispute with her sister, said, I don't know how it happens, Sister, but I meet with nobody but myself that's *always* in the right. *Il n'y a que moi qui a toujours raison.*

In these sentiments, Sir, I agree to this Constitution, with all its faults, if they are such; because I think a general Government necessary for us, . . . I consent, Sir, to this Constitution, because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best. The opinions I have had of its errors I sacrifice to the public good. I have never whisper'd a syllable

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, VI, 290–291; Franklin's *Good Humour*, 18.

of them abroad. Within these walls they were born, and here they shall die. . . .

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.<sup>38</sup>

Experience confirmed this natural faith in conciliation. He was a shrewd observer of proceedings in the Junto, the Assembly, and a thousand public meetings. He noted the differing consequences of the differing ways in which men might hold and express the same opinions. Having decided that the spirit of compromise was an essential of political success and the basis of stable, peaceful, effective self-government, he acted in character by laying down rules that would improve himself and others in this important respect.

I made it a rule to forbear all direct contradiction to the sentiments of others and all positive assertion of my own. I even forbade myself . . . the use of every word or expression in the language that imported a fixed opinion, such as "certainly," "undoubtedly," etc.; and I adopted instead of them, "I conceive," "I apprehend," or "I imagine" a thing to be so or so, or "It so appears to me at present." When another asserted something that I thought an error, I denied myself the pleasure of contradicting him abruptly and of showing immediately some absurdity in his proposition; and in answering I began by observing that in certain cases or circumstances his opinion would be right, but that in the present case there "appeared" or "seemed to me" some difference, etc. I soon found the advantage of this change in my manners: The conversations I engaged in went on more pleasantly; the modest way in which I proposed my opinions procured them a readier reception and less contradiction; I had less mortification when I was found to be in the wrong, and I more easily prevailed with others to give up their mistakes and join with me when I happened to be in the right.<sup>39</sup>

The Junto conducted its discussions deliberately in this spirit.

Our debates were to be under the direction of a president, and to be conducted in the sincere spirit of enquiry after truth, without fondness for dispute or desire of victory; and to prevent warmth, all expressions of positiveness in opinion or of direct contradiction were after some time made contraband and prohibited under small pecuniary penalties.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *Writings*, IX, 607-609; Farrand, *Records of the Federal Convention*, II, 641-643. I have used the copy in the Library of Cornell University transcribed by Franklin for Charles Carroll.

<sup>39</sup> Max Farrand, ed., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (Berkeley, Cal., 1949), 112-113; also 21-22.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 73. See *Writings*, II, 393-394, for his thoughts in this vein in connection with the Academy.

Franklin never made the mistake of identifying conciliation and compromise with democracy, of regarding this spirit as an end in itself. In the Assembly and before the House of Commons his "desire of victory" was keen and apparent, but he was certain that victory would be easier to gain if "fondness for dispute" were erased from his nature or at least not betrayed in debate. He could take a firm stand, even commit himself to an advanced position, as he did with few qualms in subscribing to the Declaration of Independence, but he was satisfied that first he had explored all possible alternatives and had done his best to avoid the final break.

The significance of conciliation and compromise for successful democracy has never been examined satisfactorily in philosophical terms. It is to be deeply regretted that Franklin could never bring himself to theorize in letter or pamphlet about this fundamental principle of his personal code and public faith. It "worked well," and that was enough for him. Yet any political theorist who attempts to fix with finality the place of conciliation and compromise in the American democratic tradition will be well advised to study Franklin's political conduct. His life argues powerfully that democracy depends on men with a nice feeling for the proper balance between faith and skepticism, principle and compromise, tenacity and conciliation. Franklin was boasting, not complaining, when he wrote from London to his American posterity: "Hence it has often happened to me, that while I have been thought here too much of an American, I have in America been deem'd too much of an Englishman."<sup>41</sup>

He could hardly have given himself a finer compliment.

#### *Freedom of speech and press*

Franklin was a shrewd and influential defender of the twin freedoms of speech and press. As the leading printer and journalist of the middle colonies, as a scientist dedicated to free inquiry and international exchange of information,<sup>42</sup> and as a politician convinced that discussion and compromise were the essence of self-government, he

<sup>41</sup> *Writings*, VI, 260, 262. See also the piece in Crane, *Letters to the Press*, 107-108.

<sup>42</sup> See Gladys Meyer, *Free Trade in Ideas: Aspects of American Liberalism Illustrated in Franklin's Philadelphia Career* (New York, 1941).



had the most intense personal reasons for championing freedom of expression.

Through seventy years he never wavered in his belief in the social usefulness of freedom of speech, nor ever shrank from active conflict with those who would suppress it. In 1722, when Benjamin was only sixteen years old, his brother James was “taken up, censured, and imprisoned for a month” for printing in his *New-England Courant* a political piece that “gave offence to the Assembly.”

During my brother’s confinement, which I resented a good deal notwithstanding our private differences, I had the management of the paper, and I made bold to give our rulers some rubs in it, which my brother took very kindly, while others began to consider me in an unfavourable light as a young genius that had a turn for libelling and satire. My brother’s discharge was accompanied with an order from the House (a very odd one) that “James Franklin should no longer print the paper called the *New England Courant*.” There was a consultation held in our printing house amongst his friends in this conjuncture. Some proposed to elude the order by changing the name of the paper; but my brother seeing inconveniences in that, it was finally concluded on as a better way to let it be printed for the future under the name of “Benjamin Franklin.”<sup>43</sup>

The piece in which the apprentice “made bold to give our rulers some rubs” was the eighth of his communications to the *Courant* from “Silence Dogood.” In this letter he quoted at length the most famous of *Cato’s Letters*, which he presented as an “Abstract from the London Journal.” Even over a pseudonym it was a bold swipe at authority, and the wonder is that Benjamin did not follow James to jail.

WITHOUT Freedom of Thought, there can be no such Thing as Wisdom; and no such Thing as publick Liberty, without Freedom of Speech; which is the Right of every Man, as far as by it, he does not hurt or controul the Right of another: And this is the only Check it ought to suffer, and the only Bounds it ought to Know.

This sacred Privilege is so essential to free Governments, that the Security of Property, and the Freedom of Speech always go together; and in those wretched Countries where a Man cannot call his Tongue his own, he can scarce call any Thing else his own. Whoever would overthrow the Liberty

<sup>43</sup> *Autobiography*, 25. Actually it was a later issue, that of Jan. 14, 1723 (in which James Franklin’s disrespect for the clergy was a bit too carelessly flaunted), that persuaded the General Court to forbid further publication under his name.

of a Nation, must begin by subduing the Freeness of Speech; a *Thing* terrible to Publick Traytors. . . .

The Administration of Government is nothing else but the Attendance of the *Trustees of the People* upon the Interest and Affairs of the People: And as it is the Part and Business of the People, for whose Sake alone all publick Matters are, or ought to be transacted, to see whether they be well or ill transacted; so it is the Interest, and ought to be the Ambition, of all honest Magistrates, to have their Deeds openly examined, and publickly scan'd. . . .

Misrepresentation of publick Measures is easily overthrown, by representing publick Measures truly; when they are honest, they ought to be publickly known, that they may be publickly commended; but if they are knavish or pernicious, they ought to be publickly detested.<sup>44</sup>

Franklin carried these youthful beliefs through seventy years of political storms. To freedom of speech he was “wholly committed.”

The publisher of *The Pennsylvania Gazette* had considerable direct influence upon the development of a free and responsible colonial press. Like the best papers in London the *Gazette* adopted a policy of neutrality in public controversies. Franklin refused to make his paper the organ of the antiproprietary party, but threw its columns open to opinions from all sides. At the same time, he kept constant watch on the political winds that blew and weathered several storms by discreetly reefing his sails. As long as freedom of the press was uncertain in Pennsylvania he was careful merely to antagonize, not enrage, the proprietary party. Meanwhile, he did his best to cement this freedom by printing a responsible journal, by calling attention to the value of differing opinions, and by publishing an account of the trial of John Peter Zenger.

By 1750 the press in England and the colonies had achieved a remarkable measure of freedom. Franklin, who wrote to the *Public Advertiser* that “Free Government depends on Opinion, not on the brutal Force of a Standing Army,”<sup>45</sup> made full use in England of what he had helped create in America: an unlicensed, uncensored press in which the public could find all important issues thoroughly, even controversially, debated.

<sup>44</sup> *Writings*, II, 25–28; *New-England Courant*, July 9, 1722. This piece from the writings of Thomas Gordon and John Trenchard was reprinted again and again in the colonial press throughout the pre-Revolutionary period.

<sup>45</sup> Crane, *Letters to the Press*, 193.

Franklin's most influential statement on freedom of press was "An Apology for Printers," which appeared in the *Gazette* June 10, 1731.<sup>46</sup> This "apology" is worth quoting at length, for it is a remarkably accurate representation of the principles of a free press that governed popular thinking in eighteenth-century America.

BEING frequently censur'd and condemn'd by different Persons for printing Things which they say ought not to be printed, I have sometimes thought it might be necessary to make a standing Apology for my self, and publish it once a Year, to be read upon all Occasions of that Nature. . . .

I request all who are angry with me on the Account of printing things they don't like, calmly to consider these following Particulars.

1. That the Opinions of Men are almost as various as their Faces; an Observation general enough to become a common Proverb, *So many Men so many Minds*.

2. That the Business of Printing has chiefly to do with Mens Opinions; most things that are printed tending to promote some, or oppose others.

3. That hence arises the peculiar Unhappiness of that Business, which other Callings are no way liable to; they who follow Printing being scarce able to do any thing in their way of getting a Living, which shall not probably give Offence to some, and perhaps to many; . . .

5. Printers are educated in the Belief, that when Men differ in Opinion, both Sides ought equally to have the Advantage of being heard by the Publick; and that when Truth and Error have fair Play, the former is always an overmatch for the latter: Hence they cheerfully serve all contending Writers that pay them well, without regarding on which side they are of the Question in Dispute. . . .

10. That notwithstanding what might be urg'd in behalf of a Man's being allow'd to do in the Way of his Business whatever he is paid for, yet Printers do continually discourage the Printing of great Numbers of bad things, and stifle them in the Birth. I my self have constantly refused to print anything that might countenance Vice, or promote Immorality; tho' by complying in such Cases with the corrupt Taste of the Majority I might have got much Money. . . .

To this shrewd and useful set of working principles should be added a reflection penned by Franklin in a private letter more than a half-century later.

It is a pleasing reflection, arising from the contemplation of our successful struggle, . . . that liberty, which some years since appeared in danger of extinction, is now regaining the ground she had lost, that arbitrary govern-

<sup>46</sup> *Writings*, II, 172-179. This piece was reprinted in other journals, e.g., *South-Carolina Gazette*, Oct. 14, 1732.

ments are likely to become more mild and reasonable, and to expire by degrees, giving place to more equitable forms; one of the effects this of the art of printing, which diffuses so general a light, augmenting with the growing day, and of so penetrating a nature, that all the window-shutters despotism and priestcraft can oppose to keep it out, prove insufficient.<sup>47</sup>

The old man at Passy was not so lucid as he had been in London or Philadelphia, but his faith in the power of truth and the influence of the printed word was as strong as ever. The most eminent exponent of freedom of speech and press in colonial America, Franklin went to his republican grave secure in the knowledge that he had done as much as any other man to advertise these great liberties to the American political consciousness.

### *Economic individualism*

Many Americans would argue that Franklin's reputation as a herald of democracy should rest in the first instance upon his solid contributions to the doctrine of economic individualism. Certainly no one, whether friend or foe of the American system, would deny that our political democracy is underpinned and conditioned by a well-defined set of economic principles and institutions. The American economic and political systems, like the American economic and political traditions, have always been inseparable, mutually nourishing elements of "the American way of life." American democracy has been, in the best and truest sense of the terms, *middle-class, bourgeois, free-enterprise* democracy. The twentieth-century trend toward governmental regulation and the welfare state has, if anything, sharpened our comprehension of this historical truth.

In the light of this truth Franklin's significance is unmistakable. As a self-made business success he represented to the world the rise to prominence of the American bourgeoisie; as an author and moralist he preached to "the middling people" the personal virtues that a nation of businessmen was to practice and cherish; as the best-known economist in colonial America he was a respected foe of mercantilism and advocate of the liberating principles of *laissez faire*.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> *Writings*, IX, 102.

<sup>48</sup> See generally L. J. Carey, *Franklin's Economic Views* (Garden City, N. Y., 1928); W. A. Wetzel, *Benjamin Franklin as an Economist* (Baltimore, 1895).

The first and second of these points may be considered together, for Franklin's moralizing was an unsolicited testimonial to his own "way to wealth." Father Abraham's formula for worldly success—"Industry and Frugality"—was a catalogue of virtues that Franklin had not come by naturally. He had cultivated these qualities consciously in order to win financial independence, and he saw no reason why they could not be cultivated by other men in business. The way in which he preached these virtues is still worth noticing. The unique features of the American democratic culture owe a good deal to these words from *The Way to Wealth*:

It would be thought a hard Government that should tax its People one-tenth Part of their *Time*, to be employed in its Service. But *Idleness* taxes many of us much more, if we reckon all that is spent in absolute *Sloth*, or doing of nothing, with that which is spent in idle Employment or Amusements, that amount to nothing. *Sloth*, by bringing on Diseases, absolutely shortens Life. *Sloth, like Rust, consumes faster than Labour wears; while the used Key is always bright*, as *Poor Richard* says. *But dost thou love Life, then do not squander Time, for that's the stuff Life is made of*, as *Poor Richard* says. How much more than is necessary do we spend in sleep, forgetting that *The sleeping Fox catches no Poultry*, and that *There will be sleeping enough in the Grave*, as *Poor Richard* says.

*If Time be of all Things the most precious, wasting Time must be*, as *Poor Richard* says, *the greatest Prodigality*; since, as he elsewhere tells us, *Lost Time is never found again; and what we call Time enough, always proves little enough*: Let us then up and be doing, and doing to the Purpose; so by Diligence shall we do more with less Perplexity. *Sloth makes all Things difficult, but Industry all easy*, as *Poor Richard* says; and *He that riseth late must trot all Day, and shall scarce overtake his Business at Night*; while *Laziness travels so slowly, that Poverty soon overtakes him*, as we read in *Poor Richard*, who adds, *Drive thy Business, let not that drive thee*; and *Early to Bed, and early to rise, makes a Man healthy, wealthy, and wise*.

So what signifies *wishing* and *hoping* for better Times. We may make these Times better, if we bestir ourselves. *Industry need not wish*, as *Poor Richard* says, *and he that lives upon Hope will die fasting. There are no Gains without Pains; then Help Hands, for I have no Lands*, or if I have, they are smartly taxed. And, as *Poor Richard* likewise observes, *He that hath a Trade hath an Estate; and he that hath a Calling, hath an Office of Profit and Honour*; but then the *Trade* must be worked at, and the *Calling* well followed, or neither the *Estate* nor the *Office* will enable us to pay our Taxes. If we are industrious, we shall never starve; for as *Poor Richard* says, *At the working Man's House Hunger looks in, but dares not enter*. Nor will the Bailiff or the Constable enter, for *Industry pays Debts, while Despair increaseth them*, says

*Poor Richard*. What though you have found no Treasure, nor has any rich Relation left you a Legacy, *Diligence is the Mother of Goodluck* as *Poor Richard* says and *God gives all Things to Industry*. Then *plough deep, while Sluggards sleep, and you shall have Corn to sell and to keep*, says *Poor Dick*. . . . 'Tis true there is much to be done, and perhaps you are weak-handed, but stick to it steadily; and you will see great Effects, for *Constant Dropping wears away Stones*, and by *Diligence and Patience the Mouse ate in two the Cable*; and *Little Strokes fell great Oaks*, as *Poor Richard* says in his Almanack, the Year I cannot just now remember.

Methinks I hear some of you say, *Must a Man afford himself no Leisure?* 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*. Do you imagine that Sloth will afford you more Comfort than Labour? 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: *Fly Pleasures, and they'll follow you*. *The diligent Spinner has a large Shift; and now I have a Sheep and a Cow, everyBody bids me good Morrow*; all which is well said by *Poor Richard*. . . .

So much for Industry, my Friends, and Attention to one's own Business; but to these we must add *Frugality*, if we would make our *Industry* more certainly successful. A Man may, if he knows not how to save as he gets, *keep his Nose all his Life to the Grindstone*, and die not worth a *Groat* at last. *A fat Kitchen makes a lean Will*, as *Poor Richard* says; and

Many Estates are spent in the Getting,  
Since Women for Tea forsook Spinning and Knitting,  
And Men for Punch forsook Hewing and Splitting.

*If you would be wealthy*, says he, in another Almanack, *think of Saving as well as of Getting: The Indies have not made Spain rich, because her Outgoes are greater than her Incomes*.

Away then with your expensive Follies, and you will not then have so much Cause to complain of hard Times, heavy Taxes, and chargeable Families; for, as *Poor Dick* says,

Women and Wine, Game and Deceit,  
Make the Wealth small and the Wants great.

And farther, *What maintains one Vice, would bring up two Children*. You may think perhaps, that a *little Tea*, or a *little Punch* now and then, Diet a *little* more costly, Clothes a *little* finer, and a *little* Entertainment now and then, can be no *great* Matter; but remember what *Poor Richard* says, *Many a Little makes a Mickle*; and farther, Beware of little *Expences*; *A small Leak*

*will sink a great Ship; and again, Who Dainties love, shall Beggars prove; and moreover, Fools make Feasts, and wise Men eat them.*<sup>49</sup>

Whether industry and frugality were qualities of Puritan origin—whether Franklin was, as many scholars have insisted,<sup>50</sup> a middleman between Cotton Mather<sup>51</sup> and John D. Rockefeller—is a question of scant meaning for his status as prophet of American capitalism. The young Franklin could easily have read about the pleasant consequences of industry and frugality in several non-Calvinistic writers, or could have learned them from the Quaker merchants of Philadelphia.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, it is highly probable that this lesson, too, was learned pragmatically, out of his own experience. In any case, his unsophisticated, straightforward writings on the ingredients of business success—the prefaces to *Poor Richard, The Way to Wealth*, and after his death the priceless *Autobiography*—were translated and retranslated into a dozen languages, printed and reprinted in hundreds of editions, read and reread by millions of people, especially by millions of young and impressionable Americans. The influence of these few hundred pages has been matched by that of no other American book.

Industry and frugality can hardly be called political principles. Yet as the central elements in the American creed of economic individualism their influence upon our politics has been pronounced and lasting. The character of a nation cannot be other than the aggregate of the characters of its citizens, and the American democracy surely owes a healthy portion of its past and present character to the fact that many of its citizens have done their best to imitate the Franklin of the *Autobiography*. The frugal, industrious, self-reliant, community-minded businessman and farmer—the typical American—lives even today in the image of “Benjamin Franklin, printer.” Carlyle was not too far from the truth when he looked at Franklin’s portrait and exclaimed, “There is the father of all the Yankees.”

<sup>49</sup> *Writings*, III, 409–413.

<sup>50</sup> See especially the famous (and distorted) treatment of Franklin in Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (London, 1930), 48–51; A. W. Griswold, “Three Puritans on Prosperity,” *New England Quarterly*, VII (1934), 475, 483–488.

<sup>51</sup> Franklin’s tribute to Mather is in *Writings*, IX, 208–209.

<sup>52</sup> F. B. Tolles, “Benjamin Franklin’s Business Mentors: The Philadelphia Quaker Merchants,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, IV (1947), 60–69.

The Puritan virtues, if we may call them that, do not add up to an especially pleasant and well-rounded personality. Franklin, however, never intended that they should stand alone, and such persons as D. H. Lawrence<sup>53</sup> have done the great bourgeois no honor in confusing his full-bodied character with that of the mythical Poor Richard. All that Franklin was trying to tell his fellow Americans in the prefaces to the almanacs was that first things must be attended to first: When a man had worked and saved his way to success and independence, he could then begin to live a fuller or even quite different life. This is what Franklin had in mind when he had Father Abraham declare, "Be *industrious* and *free*; be *frugal* and *free*."<sup>54</sup> The expansion of America is evidence enough that as elements of a larger tradition, as facets of a whole personality, industry and frugality have given fiber alike to nation and individuals. The American mind stands fast in the belief that these virtues are indispensable props of freedom and independence, for as Father Abraham observed, "A Ploughman on his Legs is higher than a Gentleman on his Knees."

We must be extremely cautious in presenting Franklin as an early advocate of *laissez faire*. Like Jefferson and Lincoln he has been rudely appropriated and glibly quoted as the patron saint of some of our most conservative movements and organizations. And like Jefferson and Lincoln he was a good deal more benevolent, progressive, and community-minded than those who now call him to judgment against all social legislation.

Franklin's most imposing service to the triumph of *laissez faire* was his attack on the restrictive doctrines of mercantilism. He was a colonial tradesman who resented the assignment of America to an inferior economic position. He was a friend of liberty who disliked the efforts of any exploiting group—whether proprietors, princes, priests, or English manufacturers—to prevent the mass of men from realizing their full capabilities and impulses toward freedom. Small wonder that he had no use for mercantilist policies. His central position in the controversy over Parliament's power to legislate for the colonies and his cordial relations with the French Physiocrats<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup> *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York, 1923), 13–31.

<sup>54</sup> *Writings*, III, 417.

<sup>55</sup> On "Franklin and the Physiocrats," see Carey, *Franklin's Economic Views*, Chap. 7. For evidence of Franklin's acceptance of most of their teachings, see *Writings*, V, 155–156, 200–202.



strengthened his earlier, provincial convictions that free trade among all nations and colonies was the way to peace and economic prosperity,<sup>56</sup> and that mercantilism, like all unnecessary tampering with “the order of God and Nature,” was unwise, unjust, unprofitable, and ultimately unworkable.<sup>57</sup> It is amusing, and highly instructive, to notice the very different thought processes by which Franklin and the Physiocrats arrived at identical conclusions about the unwisdom of government regulation of the economy and the beauties of free trade. The Physiocrats regarded free trade as part of their “natural order”—“that order which seemed obviously the best, not to any individual whomsoever, but to rational, cultured, liberal-minded men like the Physiocrats. It was not the product of the observation of external facts; it was the revelation of a principle within.”<sup>58</sup> Nothing could have been farther removed from Franklin’s pragmatic method of fixing his gaze upon effects and consequences.<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps the clearest evidence of Franklin’s devotion to a free economy is to be found in a copy of George Whatley’s *The Principles of Trade* in the Library of Congress. This anti-mercantilist tract was published in 1765 and was republished in 1774 with many new notes. The Library of Congress copy,<sup>60</sup> a second edition, bears this inscription on the flyleaf—“The gift of Doctr. B. Franklin to Th. Jefferson”—and this note on page 2—“Notes marked B. F. are Doctr. Franklin’s.” Some of the most important notes in the book are marked “B. F.” in Jefferson’s hand, and there is little doubt that these were indeed Franklin’s contributions to Whatley’s new edition. Whatley spoke in his preface of “some very respectable Friends” who had indulged him “with their Ideas and Opinions.”<sup>61</sup> The most significant of “B. F.’s” ideas was the note on pages 33–34, a hard-packed essay

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 313–314, 232–237; *Works*, II, 366.

<sup>57</sup> See especially his letter to Richard Jackson, May 9, 1753, in Carl Van Doren, ed., *Letters and Papers of Benjamin Franklin and Richard Jackson* (Philadelphia, 1947), 34.

<sup>58</sup> C. Gide and C. Rist, *A History of Economic Doctrines* (Boston, n.d.), 9.

<sup>59</sup> Examples of his wholly practical arguments against mercantilism may be found in Crane, *Letters to the Press*, 94–99, 116–119, 180–181.

<sup>60</sup> *Library of Congress Quarterly Journal of Current Acquisitions*, VIII (1950), 78.

<sup>61</sup> Franklin has been given a little too much credit for the decline of mercantilism, for it is still assumed by many writers that he had significant face-to-face influence on Smith. The case for this thesis rests on extremely unreliable evidence. See particularly T. D. Eliot, “The Relations between Adam Smith and Benjamin Franklin,” *Political Science Quarterly*, XXXIX (1924), 67–96.

containing at least four phrases found elsewhere in Franklin's writings. The spelling is Whatley's, but the words are Franklin's:

Perhaps, in general, it wou'd be beter if Government medled no farther wide Trade, than to protect it, and let it take its Cours. Most of the Statutes, or Acts, Edicts, Arets and Placaarts of Parliaments, Princes, and States, for regulating, directing, or restraining of Trade; have, we think, been either political Blunders, or Jobbs obtain'd by artful Men, for private Advantage, under Pretence of public Good. When Colbert asembled some wise old Merchants of France; and desir'd their Advice and Opinion, how he cou'd best serve and promote Commerce; their Answer, after Consultation, was, in three words only, *Laissez nous faire*. Let us alone. It is said, by a very solid Writer of the same Nation, that he is wel advanc'd in the Science of Politics, who knows the ful Force of that Maxim *Pas trop gouverner*: Not to govern too strictly, which, perhaps, wou'd be of more Use when aply'd to Trade, than in any other public Concern. It were therefore to be wish'd that Commerce were as fre between al the Nations of the World, as it is between the several Countrys of England.

In his own writings, too, Franklin was outspoken in his praise of the new principles of *laissez faire* that were shortly to be more scientifically demonstrated by Adam Smith and others.<sup>62</sup> He did as much as any American to dig the grave of mercantilism. In an age when liberalism was strongly and naturally opposed to governmental regulation of the economy, a passage such as this was a hard blow for freedom:

It seems contrary to the Nature of Commerce, for Government to interfere in the Prices of Commodities. Trade is a voluntary Thing between Buyer and Seller, in every Article of which each exercises his own Judgment, and is to please himself. . . . Where there are a number of different Traders, the separate desire of each to get more Custom will operate in bringing their goods down to a reasonable Price. It therefore seems to me, that Trade will best find and make its own Rates; and that Government cannot well interfere, unless it would take the whole Trade into its own hands . . . and manage it by its own Servants, at its own Risque.

Franklin's limitations as a *laissez-faire* economist should be clearly understood. In addition to the obvious and characteristic fact that he refused to draw together his scattered arguments against mercantilism into a balanced economic philosophy, there are several points that should be considered by modern economic individualists who

<sup>62</sup> *Writings*, IV, 469-470.

insist upon invoking his illustrious shade: his strong, quite Jeffersonian agrarian bias (“Agriculture is the great Source of Wealth and Plenty”)<sup>63</sup>; his community-minded views on the nature of private property<sup>64</sup>; his perception of the social evils of emergent industrialism (“Manufactures are founded in poverty”)<sup>65</sup>; his vigorous opposition to government by plutocracy<sup>66</sup>; his consistent hostility to the erection of tariff barriers<sup>67</sup>; and his refusal to pursue the pound after 1748. Franklin was an economic individualist, not because he had any mystic faith in the utility of the profit motive or in the benefits of an industrial society, but because “individualism was synonymous with that personal independence which enabled a man to live virtuously.”<sup>68</sup> Franklin could hardly have foreseen the great concentrations of wealth and economic power that were to signal the successes of American free enterprise, but we may rest assured that he would have found them poisonous to the simple, friendly, free, communal way of life he hoped his countrymen would cultivate and cherish. In any case, he did much to shape the economy that in turn has helped shape the American governmental system.

### *Federalism*

In most political theories or popular traditions federalism has been at best a convenient technique of constitutional organization; more often than not it has been passed over completely. In the United States of America it has been an article of faith. The Republic was founded upon the concept of limited government, and the existence of the states, semi-sovereign entities with lives and powers of their own, has always been considered the one trustworthy limit upon all urges toward centralized absolutism. The federal principle is something more fundamental and emotion-provoking than just one more check in a system of checks and balances.

<sup>63</sup> To Jonathan Shipley, Sept. 13, 1775, Yale Library. See also *Writings*, V, 202; IX, 245–246; X, 61, 121–122; Carey, *Franklin's Economic Views*, Chap. 8; C. R. Woodward, “Benjamin Franklin: Adventures in Agriculture,” in *Meet Dr. Franklin, 179–200*; E. D. Ross, “Benjamin Franklin as an Eighteenth-Century Agricultural Leader,” *Journal of Political Economy*, XXXVII (1929), 52–72.

<sup>64</sup> See Note 63.

<sup>65</sup> *Writings*, IV, 49; see also VI, 13; VIII, 611.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, X, 59.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, 261; IX, 19, 63, 241, 614–615.

<sup>68</sup> V. W. Crane, *Benjamin Franklin, Englishman and American* (Baltimore, 1936), 54.

Franklin made rich contributions to the theory and practice of American federalism. Almost alone among Americans of the mid-eighteenth century he saw, as usual from a wholly practical point of view, the solid advantages that each colony would derive from a solemn union for certain well-defined purposes. He was far ahead of the men about him in abandoning provincialism for an intercolonial attitude—too far, it would seem, for his efforts to speed up the slow development of American federalism ended in a magnificent but preordained failure.

Franklin tells the story of his great adventure in intercolonial diplomacy so frugally and honestly that it would be absurd to hear it from anyone but him:

In 1754 war with France being again apprehended, a congress of commissioners from the different Colonies was by an order of the Lords of Trade to be assembled at Albany, there to confer with the chiefs of the six nations concerning the means of defending both their country and ours. Governor Hamilton having received this order, acquainted the House with it, . . . naming the Speaker (Mr. Norris) and myself to join Mr. Thomas Penn and Mr. Secretary Peters as commissioners to act for Pennsylvania. . . . we met the other commissioners at Albany about the middle of June. In our way thither, I projected and drew up a plan for the union of all the Colonies under one government, so far as might be necessary for defence and other important general purposes. . . . I ventured to lay it before the Congress. It then appeared that several of the commissioners had formed plans of the same kind. A previous question was first taken whether a union should be established, which passed in the affirmative unanimously. A committee was then appointed, one member from each colony, to consider the several plans and report. Mine happened to be preferred, and with a few amendments was accordingly reported. By this plan the general government was to be administered by a president-general appointed and supported by the Crown and a grand council to be chosen by the representatives of the people of the several Colonies met in their respective Assemblies. The debates upon it in Congress went on daily hand in hand with the Indian business. Many objections and difficulties were started, but at length they were all overcome, and the plan was unanimously agreed to, and copies ordered to be transmitted to the Board of Trade and to the Assemblies of the several provinces. Its fate was singular. The Assemblies did not adopt it, as they all thought there was too much *prerogative* in it; and in England it was judged to have too much of the *democratic*. The Board of Trade therefore did not approve of it; nor recommend it for the approbation of His Majesty; . . .<sup>69</sup>

<sup>69</sup> *Autobiography*, 159–160. See also his three letters of 1754 to Governor Shirley, *Writings*, III, 231–241. These were reprinted in the *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, Jan. 16, 1769.

The powers of the president-general and grand council were sharply limited by the purpose of the proposed union—defense of the frontier. They were directed to four specific problems: Indian treaties “in which the general interest of the colonies may be concerned”; war and peace with the Indians; purchases and settlement of western lands; and regulation of Indian trade. To these ends the union was further authorized to “raise and pay soldiers,” “build forts,” and “equip vessels,” as well as to “make laws, and lay and levy such general duties, imposts, or taxes, as to them shall appear most equal and just.” Representation on the council was to be proportioned to each colony’s contributions to the common treasury, and the council was protected against dissolution or prorogation by the president-general.<sup>70</sup> Finally, the interests of the mother country were secured by subjecting all laws to the scrutiny and possible veto of the King-in-Council.

The Albany Plan was not so much the creation of one man’s lively genius as the product of several fine minds working toward a long-contemplated goal, with all arrangements conditioned sharply by the fear of offending a short-sighted Crown and stubborn colonies. Yet it was Franklin’s plan that was preferred to all others and was adopted by the commissioners with very few changes. If he did not have a well-developed understanding of the federal principle, he did recognize the advantages and delicacies of confederation-for-defense. The Albany Plan is a landmark on the rough road that was to lead through the first Continental Congresses and the Articles of Confederation to the Constitution of 1787. It was a notable expression of Franklin’s dominant faith in co-operative effort in a common cause. He never ceased believing that in this matter at least he was right and other men wrong.

I am still of opinion it would have been happy for both sides the water if it had been adopted. The Colonies so united would have been sufficiently strong to have defended themselves; there would then have been no need of troops from England; of course the subsequent pretence for taxing America and the bloody contest it occasioned would have been avoided. But such mistakes are not new; history is full of the errors of states and princes.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>70</sup> For the documents of the Albany Plan, see *Writings*, III, 197–227, 231–241. See generally Mrs. L. K. Mathews, “Benjamin Franklin’s Plans for a Colonial Union, 1750–1775,” *American Political Science Review*, VIII (1914), 393–412.

<sup>71</sup> *Autobiography*, 161.

In June, 1775, as delegate to the second Continental Congress, Franklin proposed a plan, "Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union" for the "United Colonies of North America,"<sup>72</sup> which was based on his Albany Plan and several other instances of federation in colonial experience. The Congress was not ready for any such radical step, but again Franklin had pointed the way for other men to follow. In the crucial matter of representation Franklin, a "large-state" man with no shred of provincial prejudice, was strongly opposed to the Articles of Confederation eventually adopted. Representation in his proposed Congress was to be proportioned to population.<sup>73</sup> He was not entirely satisfied with the solution adopted by the Convention of 1787, but he was strong in his final faith in federal union.

Although somewhat outside the scope of this article, Franklin's opinions on the questions of imperial federation and the power of Parliament to legislate for the colonies deserve brief mention. He was a perfect representative of the process of trial and error, of backing and filling, through which the leading colonials were moving toward the "dominion theory" finally implied in the Declaration of Independence. Having passed and repassed through the intermediate stages—acknowledgment of Parliament's power to legislate for the colonies,<sup>74</sup> advocacy of colonial representation in Parliament (an old favorite of Franklin's),<sup>75</sup> assertion of the fine-spun distinction between internal and external taxation,<sup>76</sup> simultaneous and confusing assertion of the distinction between taxation for revenue and taxation for regulation of commerce<sup>77</sup>—Franklin took final refuge in the useful conclusion that the colonies, as equals of the mother country, were united to her only "by having one common sovereign, the King."<sup>78</sup> Under this interpretation of the colonial system, the achieve-

<sup>72</sup> *Writings*, VI, 420-425.

<sup>73</sup> Franklin Papers, Vol. 50, Pt. 1, fol. 35, APS.

<sup>74</sup> *Writings*, III, 207. The "rights of Englishmen" would limit this power in the colonies as in England. *Ibid.*, III, 232-241.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 238-241; Crane, *Letters to the Press*, 59, 59 (note), 72, 129 (note); Franklin's *Good Humour*, 22.

<sup>76</sup> *Writings*, IV, 424; Crane, *Letters to the Press*, 53-54.

<sup>77</sup> *Writings*, IV, 421, 428; Crane, *Letters to the Press*, 201-203; Franklin's *Good Humour*, 20; Franklin's *Claim of the Colonies*, 8; Franklin's *Wheelock*, 26, 29, 44, 48-50; Franklin's *Ramsay*, 62.

<sup>78</sup> *Writings*, V, 260; see also IV, 445-446; V, 114-115, 280; VI, 260-261; Crane, *Letters to the Press*, 46-49, 110-112, 134-138. See generally C. F. Mullett, *Colonial Claims to Home Rule*

ment of independence, at least on paper, involved nothing more than renouncing allegiance to a tyrannical king.<sup>79</sup>

### *Authentic democracy*

One final observation must be made and supported before we can close the circle of Franklin's political philosophy: In thought, action, and argument he was a warm-hearted democrat, in the best and fullest sense of the word. Origin, temperament, environment, and experience all helped to produce the leading democrat of the age. The last of these, experience, was especially instrumental. The delightful fact that Franklin, as he saw more and more of the way the world did its business, grew more and more sour on the supposed merits of monarchy and aristocracy leads us to believe that his democracy, too, was of pragmatic origin. Whatever the explanation, there is convincing proof of his ever growing respect for the capacity of ordinary men to govern themselves. His faith in the judgment of the people was not completely uncritical, but it was a faith on which he was willing to act.<sup>80</sup>

One example was the manner in which Franklin refused to abandon the tenets of radical Whiggery, but rather refined and republicanized them into a profoundly democratic system of constitutional principles. Franklin was one of the few old revolutionaries at the Convention of 1787 who did not embrace the new faith in the separation of powers. He signed the document willingly, believing that it was the best obtainable under the circumstances, and hoping that it would not frustrate the natural course of democratic progress. Yet he would have preferred a constitution with these radically different arrangements: a plural executive, unsalaried and probably elected by the legislature; a unicameral legislature, with representation propor-

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(Columbia, Mo., 1927); Carl Becker, *The Declaration of Independence* (New York, 1922), Chap. 3; C. H. McIlwain, *The American Revolution: A Constitutional Interpretation* (New York, 1924). For Franklin's conversion, see V. W. Crane, "Benjamin Franklin and the Stamp Act," Colonial Society of Massachusetts, *Publications*, XXXII, 56-77, and *Benjamin Franklin: Englishman and American*, 72-139.

<sup>79</sup> For an unguarded version of Franklin's mature opinion of the power of Parliament, see his *Claim of the Colonies*, 5-13.

<sup>80</sup> *Writings*, V, 134; VIII, 451-452; IX, 330, 638; X, 7; Farrand, *Records of the Federal Convention*, II, 204-205, 249.

tioned to population; annual elections for all holders of public office, including officers of the militia; universal manhood suffrage, with no bow to property<sup>81</sup>; a straightforward, unqualified bill of rights; and an easy method of formal amendment.<sup>82</sup>

Since he practiced what he preached and “doubted a little of his own infallibility,” he did not find it necessary to withdraw from the convention. Yet his constitutional notions make clear that he was very much in sympathy with the radical opposition to the Constitution. The one point at which he departed from their doctrine may well have been decisive: Having abandoned the provincial attitude before most of the anti-Federalists were born, Franklin had little sympathy for their antinational point of view. The old imperialist had great faith in the advantages of a “general government.” He hoped out loud that each member of the proposed Congress would “consider himself rather as a Representative of the whole, than as an Agent for the Interests of a particular State.”<sup>83</sup> And he even supported a motion that “the national legislature ought to be empowered to negative all laws, passed by the several States, contravening, in the opinion of the national legislature, the articles of union . . . or any Treaties subsisting under the authority of the union.”<sup>84</sup> Franklin’s final political faith was as “national” as it was “democratical.” He was one of the few men in America unafraid to use both of these adjectives in public.

Another example of Franklin’s progress toward an ever purer democratic faith was his change in attitude on the question of Negro slavery. Although the Junto had taken an early stand against slavery, the organizer of the Junto was not above dealing in “likely young Negroes” as a side line. In time he came to see the monstrous injustice of the thing, and gave full backing to several organizations

<sup>81</sup> Franklin characterized the “forty-shilling freehold” act as “an infamous Breach of Trust & Violation of the Rights of the Freeholders.” Franklin’s Ramsay, 42–45.

<sup>82</sup> Evidence of these principles is to be found in *Writings*, III, 197–227, 307–320; VI, 420–425; IX, 169–170, 590–604, 674; X, 54–60, 501–502. See also Farrand, *Records of the Federal Convention*, I, 47, 48, 54, 61, 77–78, 81–85, 98–99, 103, 106, 197–200, 216, 427, 450–452, 488–489; II, 65, 120, 204, 208; M. R. Eiselen, *Franklin’s Political Theories* (Garden City, N. Y., 1928), Chaps. 8–12. The Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776 was more to Franklin’s liking. See J. P. Selsam, *The Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776* (Philadelphia, 1936).

<sup>83</sup> *Writings*, IX, 596.

<sup>84</sup> Farrand, *Records of the Federal Convention*, I, 47. The last phrase was his own contribution.



devoted to freeing and educating the Negro slave. His last public act was performed as President of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, when he signed a memorial to the House of Representatives calling for measures to discourage the slave trade. His last public writing was a letter to the *Federal Gazette* satirizing the arguments of a Georgia congressman in defense of this traffic.<sup>85</sup> By the time of his death he had expressed all the fundamental economic and ethical arguments against slavery, asserting in particular that it was unjust, unnatural, and inhuman, and a corrupting menace to free institutions and love of liberty.

Finally, Franklin was firmly in the popular ranks in his sanguine opinion of the nature of political parties. He did not consider them "factions," but natural products of free government, ventilators of public issues, and effective instruments of the popular will. In *The Internal State of America*, an undated but late sociological musing, Franklin had these characteristic words to say on a problem that gave some of the framers sleepless nights:

It is true that in some of our States there are Parties and Discords; but let us look back, and ask if we were ever without them? Such will exist wherever there is Liberty; and perhaps they help to preserve it. By the Collision of different Sentiments, Sparks of Truth are struck out, and political Light is obtained. The different Factions, which at present divide us, aim all at the Publick Good; the Differences are only about the various Modes of promoting it. Things, Actions, Measures and Objects of all kinds, present themselves to the Minds of Men in such a Variety of Lights, that it is not possible we should all think alike at the same time on every Subject, when hardly the same Man retains at all times the same Ideas of it. Parties are therefore the common Lot of Humanity; and ours are by no means more mischievous or less beneficial than those of other Countries, Nations and Ages, enjoying in the same Degree the great Blessing of Political Liberty.<sup>86</sup>

These are the thoughts of a wise, kindly, democratic old man who looked upon co-operation-through-organization as the motive power of free society.

<sup>85</sup> *Writings*, X, 86-91; also 66-68, 127-129. See generally V. W. Crane, "Benjamin Franklin on Slavery and American Liberties," *PMHB*, LXII (1938), 1-11; R. I. Shelling, "Benjamin Franklin and the Dr. Bray Associates," *ibid.*, LXIII (1939), 282-293; A. S. Pitt, "Franklin and the Quaker Movement against Slavery," *Friends Historical Association Bulletin*, XXXII (1943), 13-31; Carey, *Franklin's Economic Views*, Chap. 4.

<sup>86</sup> *Franklin Papers*, X, 2263-2264, Library of Congress; *Writings*, X, 120-121. For earlier judgments, see *ibid.*, II, 110, 232, 233, 295; III, 319-320.

Conclusions are dangerous, especially when they deal with great men, even more so when the great man in question has already been rounded off by Becker and Van Doren.<sup>87</sup> This conclusion will therefore be narrow and apposite. Skirting any evaluation of Franklin's complete character and accomplishments, omitting any further mention of his influence on the American tradition, it will confine itself rigidly to one date and place—February 13, 1766, in the British House of Commons—and one question: What political faith did Franklin express and represent as he stood before the members and answered their questions about British North America?<sup>88</sup>

First, he represented a pattern of popular political thought, ancient in origin, but new in sweep. The more perceptive gentlemen, among them Franklin's well-wishers, could look behind his spare phrases and see the mind of a whole continent in political ferment. Here before them was visible evidence that the people of the colonies were thinking in terms, not only of the constitutional rights of Englishmen, but of the natural rights of all men. Whiggery, under several names and guises, had swept America, and the ultimate Whig was now at the bar. It must have been an unsettling experience for some of the members to hear the blessed words "unjust," "unconstitutional," "liberties," "privileges," and "common consent" drop from the lips of this middling person.

Second, Franklin represented new habits of thinking about political and social problems. However legalistic and theoretical were most of the arguments out of Boston and Philadelphia, his brand of persuasion was more typical of the average colonial mind. Franklin's method was an informed, hard-headed appeal to facts. "The *Fact* seems sufficient for our Purpose, and the *Fact* is notorious." His case for the repeal of the Stamp Act could be compressed in the warning, "It doesn't work; it never will." America's favorite argument was seeing its first heavy duty.

He likewise represented the incipient fact of American federalism. Himself a uniquely *American* official—"I am Deputy Postmaster-

<sup>87</sup> See Becker, *Franklin*, 31-37; Van Doren, *Franklin*, 260-262, 781-782, *Meet Dr. Franklin*, 1-10, 221-234, and his review of Becker in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, IV (1947), 231-234. An old evaluation of Franklin that has stood up well is Theodore Parker, *Historic Americans* (Boston, 1908), 1-40.

<sup>88</sup> This great "examination" is in *Writings*, IV, 412-448. It was widely reprinted in the colonial press.

General of North-America”—he breathed the continental spirit that was soon to power the final drive toward independence. He could tell the House that “every assembly on the continent, and every member in every assembly” had denied Parliament’s authority to pass the Stamp Act. From this day forward, throughout the next nine years, Franklin was unofficial ambassador for all the colonies. The American union was hastening to be born, and the sign of union was Dr. Franklin.

Next, Franklin represented the growing American conviction that the colonies were marked for a future state of “glory and honor” that would dwarf that of the mother country. As early as 1752 *Poor Richard* had echoed the widespread belief that America was a God-ordained haven for the oppressed of every land:

Where the sick Stranger joys to find a Home,  
Where casual Ill, maim’d Labour, freely come;  
Those worn with Age, Infirmary or Care,  
Find Rest, Relief, and Health returning fair.  
There too the Walls of rising Schools ascend,  
For Publick Spirit still is Learning’s Friend,  
Where Science, Virtue, sown with liberal Hand,  
In future Patriots shall inspire the Land.

God’s plans for America were even more challenging than that:

I have long been of opinion, that *the foundations of the future grandeur and stability of the British empire lie in America*; and though, like other foundations, they are low and little now, they are, nevertheless, broad and strong enough to support the greatest political structure that human wisdom ever yet erected.<sup>89</sup>

A different sort of empire, cast loose from the mother country, was to rise on this foundation and to satisfy the prophecies of destiny that Franklin had pronounced.

Finally, and most important, Franklin stood before Commons and the world as the representative colonial. This person who knew so much more about America than anyone else, who talked of rights and resistance so confidently, this was no Belcher or Hutchinson, no placeman or royal governor, but a new breed of man to be heard in such high places. Although Franklin was actually the most extraor-

<sup>89</sup> Franklin to Lord Kames, Jan. 3, 1760, *Works*, VII, 188.

dinary man of the century, on that memorable day he was the true colonial—self-contained, plain-spoken, neither arrogant nor humble, the visible expression of the new way of life and liberty that was to occupy the continent. And as men looked in wonder at him and America, so he and America looked in disbelief at England. The eyes of the colonists seemed open for the first time to the corruption and self-interest that cankered and degraded all British politics. The new world was at last face to face with the old, and about to reject it for something more wholesome. The old world would realize too late that Franklin spoke for a multitude even then turning away to a faith of its own when he said of the British nation, “It knows and feels itself so universally corrupt and rotten from Head to Foot, that it has little Confidence in any publick Men or publick Measures.”<sup>90</sup>

Now that these things have been written, now that Franklin has surrendered his identity to colonial democracy, perhaps it would be proper to rescue him and end this article with our attention fixed on him alone. He was, after all, Dr. Benjamin Franklin, the most amazing man America has produced, as untypical in the whole as he was typical in his parts. And in fixing our attention we must recall the one conviction that brought harmony to this human multitude: the love of liberty—in every land, in every time, and for every man.

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.”<sup>91</sup>

This was Franklin’s political faith.

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<sup>90</sup> To Galloway, Feb. 17, 1758, Mar. 13, 1768, and Apr. 20, 1771, Yale Library.

<sup>91</sup> To David Hartley, Dec. 4, 1789, *Writings*, X, 72.