

An Assembly of Demigods

Benjamin Franklin

James Madison to William Bradford, June 19, 1775

Little did I ever expect to hear that Jeremiah's Doctrine that "the heart of man is deceitful above all things & desperately wicked" was exemplified in the celebrated Dr. Franklin, & if the suspicions against him be well founded it certainly is remarkably exemplified. Indeed it appears to me that the bare suspicion of his guilt amounts very nearly to a proof of its reality. If he were the man he formerly was, & has even of late pretended to be, his conduct in Philadelphia on this critical occasion could have left no room for surmise or distrust. He certainly would have been both a faithful informer & an active member of the Congress. His behavior would have been explicit & his Zeal warm and conspicuous.

John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 23, 1775

Dr. Franklin has been very constant in his Attendance on Congress from the Beginning. His Conduct has been composed and grave and in the Opinion of many Gentlemen very reserved. He has not assumed any Thing, nor affected to take the lead; but has seemed to choose that the Congress should pursue their own Principles and sentiments and adopt their own Plans: Yet he has not been backward: has been very useful, on many occasions, and discovered a Disposition entirely American. He does not hesitate at our boldest Measures, but rather seems to think us, too irresolute, and backward. He thinks us at present in an odd State, neither in Peace nor War, neither dependent nor independent. But he thinks that We shall soon assume a Character more decisive.

He thinks that We have the Power of preserving ourselves, and that even if We should be driven to the disagreeable Necessity of assuming a total independency, and set up a separate state, We could maintain it. The People of England, have thought that the Opposition in America, was wholly owing to Dr. Franklin: and I suppose their scribblers will attribute the Temper, and Proceedings of this Congress to him: but there cannot be a greater Mistake. He has had but little share farther than to co operate and assist. He is however a great and good Man.

William Carmichael To William Bingham, Paris, June 25, 1777

The age of Dr. Franklin in some measure hinders him from taking so active a part in the drudgery of business as his great zeal and abilities would otherwise enable him to execute. He is the master to whom we children in politics all look up for counsel, and whose name is everywhere a passport to be well received.

John Adams to Abigail Adams, Passy, France, April 25, 1778

My venerable Colleague enjoys a Privilege here, that is much to be envied. Being seventy Years of Age, the Ladies not only allow him to embrace them as often as he pleases, but they are perpetually embracing him.—I told him Yesterday, I would write this to America.

John Adams: Diary, June 18, 1779

[In a conversation with Marbois.] That it was often affirmed that Mr. Franklin spoke French as fluently and elegantly, as a Courtier at Versailles, but every Man that knew and spoke sincerely, agreed that he spoke it very ill. Persons spoke of these Things, according to their Affections.

He said it was Flattery. That he would not flatter, it was very true that both Mr. F. and I spoke French, badly.

Benjamin Franklin to William Carmichael, Passy, January 23, 1782

I wonder at What you have heard that the Congress had for eight Months no Letters from Mr. Adams, as I think him the most diligent of all Correspondents, having seen in the Votes of Congress Mention made of the Dates of Letters received from him, by which it seemed that he had written almost every Day, & sometimes twice a Day. My great Fault is writing too seldom: I should write oftener (and should be happy) if I had nothing else to do.

John Jay to Robert R. Livingston, Paris, June 25, 1782

I shall endeavor to get lodgings as near to Dr. Franklin as I can. He is in perfect good health, and his mind appears more vigorous than that of any man of his age I have known. He certainly is a valuable Minister, and an agreeable companion.

Comte de Vergennes to Chevalier de la Luzerne, Versailles, February 15, 1784

We think that Congress has acted wisely in recalling most of its agents in Europe; their character is too little conciliatory, and their head too much excited, to admit of their being useful to their country. The calmness and the prudence of Mr. Franklin are certainly grave faults in their eyes; but it is by those qualities that this minister has inspired us with confidence. I do not believe that the superior services which this minister has rendered to his country will be requited; I can say that it will be very difficult for Congress to replace him.

Elbridge Gerry to Samuel Adams, New York, September 30, 1785

Doctor Franklin has, as You will perceive by the Pennsylvania papers, been puffed at a great Rate, & will probably be in the Chair of that State. His Grandson came to this City last Evening, but his object I cannot yet ascertain. I confess to You, I have a jealous Eye on the Doctor: he is devoted to the Court of Versailles, & should he come to Congress as a Delegate & obtain the Chair, he may do more Mischief than We are apt to imagine. But his great Age seems almost an insuperable Bar to the Execution of an extensive plan.

Benjamin Rush to Richard Price, Philadelphia, May 25, 1786

Our venerable friend Dr. Franklin continues to enjoy as much health and spirits as are compatible with his time of life. I dined with him a few days ago in a most agreeable circle, where he appeared as cheerful and gay as a young man of five-and-twenty. But his conversation was full of the wisdom and experience of mellow old age. He has destroyed party rage in our state, or to borrow an allusion from one of his discoveries, his presence and advice, like oil upon troubled waters, have composed the contending waves of faction which for so many years agitated the State of Pennsylvania.

William Pierce: Sketches of Members of the Constitutional Convention, 1787

Dr. Franklin is well known to be the greatest philosopher of the present age;—all the operations of nature he seems to understand,—the very heavens obey him, and the Clouds yield up their Lightning to be imprisoned in his rod. But what claim he has to the politician, posterity must determine. It is certain that he does not shine much in public Council,—he is no Speaker, nor does he seem to let politics engage his attention. He is, however, a most extraordinary Man,

and tells a story in a style more engaging than anything I ever heard. Let his Biographer finish his character. He is 82 years old, and possesses an activity of mind equal to a youth of 25 years of age.

John Adams to Benjamin Rush, New York, April 4, 1790

The History of our Revolution will be one continued Lie from one end to the other. the essence of the whole will be *that Dr. Franklin's electrical Rod, smote the Earth and out sprung General Washington. That Franklin electrified him with his rod—and thence forward these two conducted all the Policy, Negotiations, Legislatures and War.*

John Adams to John Trumbull, New York, April 25, 1790

Franklin is gone, Peace to his Shade—Personal Resentments and Hatreds are not to be found in my nature in public affairs. I feel no ill will to his Memory—but I owe more to Truth than to his Fame; and I owe the Truth to my Country and Posterity. The last Letter of abuse to Congress in which he mentioned me he said I “was always an honest Man.”—I wish my Conscience would allow me to say as much of him.—But from the first to the last of my acquaintance with him, I can reconcile his Conduct in public affairs neither to the Character of an honest Man, nor to that of a Man of Sense.

Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Jefferson Randolph, Washington, November 24, 1808

It was one of the rules which, above all others, made Doctor Franklin the amiable of men in society, “never to contradict anybody.” If he was urged to announce an opinion, he did it rather by asking questions, as if for information, or by suggesting doubts.