

Center *for the Study of the* American Constitution

NO. 3: BENJAMIN FRANKLIN (1706–1790)

Benjamin Franklin was the most famous American of the Revolutionary era. Born in Massachusetts, Franklin's formal education ended when he was ten years old. He served as an apprentice in his older brother's print shop, before running away, eventually arriving in Philadelphia in 1723. By 1730 he had started his own print shop, publishing a weekly newspaper, a variety of pamphlets and broadsides, and, between 1732 and 1758, the immensely popular *Poor Richard's Almanack*. Having achieved financial independence, Franklin retired from full-time printing in 1748 to concentrate on public service and scientific studies. His book *Experiments and Observations on Electricity*, published in 1751, won him international fame, a prestigious award from the Royal Society of London in 1753, and admittance as a member to the same society three years later. St. Andrews University and Oxford University awarded him doctorates in 1759 and 1762, respectively. He pursued scientific studies that had practical applications (lightning rods, bifocals, the Franklin stove, etc.) and associated with the international intellectual community for the rest of his life.

Franklin was a businessman, philanthropist, diplomat, humorist, and pragmatist. While a political figure, Franklin was no political theorist. From 1736 to 1751 he served as clerk of the colonial Pennsylvania assembly. Elected a delegate, Franklin served in the assembly from 1751 to 1764, where he led the anti-proprietary party that tried to make Pennsylvania a royal colony. From 1737 to 1753 he was postmaster for Pennsylvania; and he served as deputy postmaster for all of the colonies from 1753 to 1774. Throughout his years in Pennsylvania, he personally sponsored many public improvements, philanthropic and benevolent societies, (a lending library, a hospital, a fire brigade, the slave abolitionist society, and the Pennsylvania Academy, which became the University of Pennsylvania). Starting in 1757, he served for almost two decades in London as the colonial agent (a sort of lobbyist), first for Pennsylvania and then additionally for New Jersey, Georgia, and the Massachusetts House of Representatives. Returning to Philadelphia in 1775, Franklin became a delegate to the Second Continental Congress, where he served on the five-man committee to draft the Declaration of Independence. Franklin spent the next decade (1776–1785) as a diplomat in France. He negotiated the treaties of alliance and commerce with France in February 1778, sat on the commission that negotiated peace with Great Britain, and served as U.S. minister to France until, at the age of seventy-nine, he resigned and returned to Philadelphia. During the last fifteen years of his life, Franklin repeatedly suffered from the excruciating pain of the gout and kidney stones. In 1785, he was elected to a three-year term as president of the Pennsylvania Supreme Executive Council (the equivalent of governor), where, as the elder statesman, he helped to reduce the bitter political partisanship. The assembly did not appoint him to the Constitutional Convention until he expressed a desire to serve, whereupon he was unanimously added to the state's delegation. His service in the Convention and his support of the newly proposed plan of government were powerful inducements for others to ratify the Constitution. ■

John Adams to James Warren, Philadelphia, 30 September 1775

Dr. Franklin needs nothing to be said. There is no abler or better American that I know of.

William Carmichael to C. W. F. Dumas, Havre, 21 January 1777

You will no doubt have our Paris news from the prophet who draws down fire from heaven.

Silas Deane to President of Congress John Hancock, Paris, ca. 16 March 1777

[Franklin] is universally esteemed and respected here, as well as in America, and, I may say, through the learned world.

William Carmichael to William Bingham, Paris, 25 June 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 President of Congress Thomas McKean, Braintree, 20 September 1779

I presume Congress intend to appoint a secretary to the Commission, and Consuls for the Management of Commercial and maritime matters. It is highly necessary. Franklin is a Wit and a Humorist, I know. He may be a Philosopher [i.e., scientist], for what I know, but he is not a sufficient Statesman, he knows too little of American Affairs or the Politicks of Europe, and takes too little Pains to inform himself of Either. He is too old, too infirm, too indolent and dissipated, to be sufficient for the Discharge of all the important Duties of Ambassador, Secretary, Admiral, Commercial Agent, Board of War, Board of Treasury, Commissary of Prisoners, &c. &c. &c. as he is at present in that Department, besides an immense Correspondence, and Acquaintance, each of which would be enough for the whole Time of the most active Man in the Vigor of Youth.

Yet such is his Name on both Sides the Water, that it is best, perhaps that he should be left there. But a secretary and Consuls should be appointed to do the Business, or it will not be done, or if done it will not be done by him, but by busy People who insinuate themselves into his Confidence without either such Heads or Hearts as Congress should trust.

Elkanah Watson: Memoirs, 19 November 1781

I dined and spent the evening with Franklin, at Passy; arriving at an early hour, I observed him in a distant room reading, in the exact position he is represented in an excellent engraving, his left arm resting on a table, and his chin in his right hand thumb. I was soon conducted to him, and was cordially received, as usual. From a long habit of mixing with courtiers and men of eminence, as well in America as in Europe, he possesses an urbanity of manners, in connection with his venerable locks suspended over his shoulders, and his personal dignity, which commands reverence and respect; and yet so natural and fascinating in his deportment, that I always find myself perfectly at ease in his presence. Although he loves adulation, he woos it and hugs it to his heart in a manner unperceived, and therefore diminishes naught from his sterling merit. Not so with the vain boaster, trumpeting his own fame above all the fraudulent men who float upon borrowed plumes. Such men are always detected; soon sink into contempt, and hold a short run with posterity. But the name of Franklin will freshen with posterity, and increase in fame, through a long line of generations, while America shall bear a name.

John Jay to Secretary for Foreign Affairs Robert R. Livingston, Paris, 25 June 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.

John Adams to Abigail Adams, The Hague, 12 October 1782

Dr. Franklin has been a long time much indisposed as I lately learn with the Gout and Strangury.

James Warren to John Adams, Milton, Mass., 27 October 1783

I don't know that I detest any Character more than that of the Old Man, who is, as you might expect your determined Enemy. . . . How long will he live? and if he lives how long can he be able to preserve the good Opinion and Confidence of his Country? The Bubble must burst soon, or Mankind are more lost to Sentiment and Virtue, than I can suppose.

John Quincy Adams: Diary, 26 February 1785

Mr. Franklin has been so long in France, that he is more a Frenchman than an American: I doubt whether he will enjoy himself perfectly if he returns to America.

Benjamin Rush to Richard Price, Philadelphia, 25 May 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 [i.e., scientist] 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.

President George Washington to Benjamin Franklin, New York, 23 September 1789

Would to God, my dear Sir, that I could congratulate you upon the removal of that excruciating pain under which you labor! and that your existence might close with as much ease to yourself, as its continuance has been beneficial to our Country & useful to Mankind—or, if the united wishes of a free people, joined with the earnest prayers of every friend to science & humanity could relieve the body from pains or infirmities, you could claim an exemption on this score. But this cannot be, and you have within yourself the only resource to which we can confidently apply for relief—a philosophic mind.

If to be venerated for benevolence—if to be admired for talent—if to be esteemed for patriotism—if to be beloved for philanthropy can gratify the human mind, you must have the pleasing consolation to know that you have not lived in vain; and I flatter myself that it will not be ranked among the least grateful occurrences of your life to be assured that so long as I retain my memory—you will be thought on with respect, veneration and affection by Dear Sir Your sincere friend and obedient Humble Servant.

Vice President John Adams to Benjamin Rush, New York, 4 April 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.*

Benjamin Rush: Commonplace Book, 18 April 1790

Last evening at 11 o'clock died the venerable Dr. Franklin. He had been reduced by the stone in his bladder, but died finally of a pleurisy which terminated in an abscess in his lungs from which he discharged matter a few days before his death. This pleurisy was caught by lying with his windows open. He possessed his reason to the last day of his life, but spoke nothing of his future existence or expectation beyond the grave.

Vice President John Adams to John Trumbull, New York, 25 April 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 Paine: Age of Reason, II, 1795

Those who knew Benjamin Franklin will recollect that his mind was ever young; his temper ever serene. Science, that never grows grey, was always his mistress. He was never without an object; for when we cease to have an object, we become like an invalid in an hospital waiting for death.

Thomas Jefferson to Samuel Smith, Monticello, 22 August 1798

Dr. Franklin, the greatest man and ornament of the age and country in which he lived.

Benjamin Rush: Travels Through Life, c. 1800

I never visited him without learning something.

John Adams to John Marshall, Washington, D.C., 10 February 1801

. . . Dr. Franklin, the most concise, sprightly, and entertaining writer of his time.

John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 19 September 1806

My experience is perfectly conformable to yours respecting silent men. Silence is most commonly design and intrigue. In Franklin it was very remarkable, because he was naturally a great talker. I have conversed with him frequently in his garrulous humors, and his grandson, or son, Billy, has told me that he never knew a greater talker than his grandfather. But at other times he was as silent as midnight, and often upon occasions and in relation to subjects on which it was his duty to speak. Arthur Lee told me he had known him to sit whole evenings in London, without uttering a word, in company with the first men for science and literature, when the conversation had turned upon subjects on which he was supposed to be well informed.

Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Jefferson Randolph, Washington, D.C., 24 November 1808

It was one of the rules which, above all others, made Doctor Franklin the most 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.

Benjamin Rush to John Adams, Philadelphia, 19 August 1811

The Doctor was a rigid economist, but he was in every stage of his life charitable, hospitable, and generous. In his private intercourse with his fellow citizens he was honest even above suspicion, and from all I have ever seen and know of him I believe he was strictly upright and correct as a servant of the public.

Thomas Jefferson to Robert Walsh, Monticello, 4 December 1818

As to the charge of subservience to France, besides the evidence of his friendly colleagues before named [Arthur Lee and John Adams], two years of my own service with him at Paris, daily visits, and the most friendly and confidential conversation, convince me it had not a shadow of foundation. He possessed the confidence of that government in the highest degree, insomuch, that it may truly be said, that they were more under his influence, than he under theirs. The fact is, that his temper was so amiable and conciliatory, his conduct so rational, never urging impossibilities, or even things unreasonably inconvenient to them, in short, so moderate and attentive to their difficulties, as well as our own, that what his enemies called subserviency, I saw was only that reasonable disposition, which, sensible that advantages are not all to be on one side, yielding what is just and liberal, is the more certain of obtaining liberality and justice. Mutual confidence produces, of course, mutual influence, and this was all which subsisted between Dr. Franklin and the government of France.

Manasseh Cutler: Reminiscences, post 1821

As I walked up the avenue to his house, I reflected, I am going into the presence of a *great man*—one who had stood before kings and mighty ones of the earth. I hesitated; my knees smote together; but I could not retreat. I was greatly surprised to see in Dr. Franklin a small, lively, old man in his morning-gown, perfectly simple and unaffected in his appearance and manners. He immediately recognized me as the author of a botanical work—invited me to walk in his spacious and elegant garden; and in five minutes I felt as free and as much at home with him as with my own family or my most intimate friend. ■

