A New Look at the American Revolution: Franklin and Washington

In the light shed by the previous examination of European and Native American influences, the process of the American Revolution and gaining independence reveals several threads weaving within the otherwise well-known events. We will focus on two levels. The first is the dynamic of the events, which shows how the Iroquois impulse was alive under the surface. More easily seen, but often misunderstood, is the contribution of early Freemasonry. Two extreme views hold the ground about Freemasonry. One view almost completely dismisses Freemasonry and tends to minimize, if not obliterate, its part in the events leading to the birth of the federal government. The other view sees a hidden "Freemason conspiracy." The facts tend to prove something different from either of the two extremes. Little-known and unexplored facts reveal a different image of the familiar events.

The New Message

We have already seen what a special position Franklin occupied in the scientific and spiritual thinking of his time. We can say he was a lone exception to the unavoidable tendency of the era, which tended to polarize science and religion. Franklin showed the way to an experiential spirituality that would be devoid of dogma; an inner perception of morality that upholds a free and completely individual path. This path led him to experiment with thirteen virtues; to assess the effects of both consumption and abstention from alcohol and meat; and to assess how right thinking could lead him to right action. But Franklin's role was not limited to the depth of his speculative thinking. As early as 1764, he was appropriately called the "First American."[28] (The term was later transferred to Washington. It is easy to see why Washington, the man of action, could usurp the title.) Even so, America was an idea before it became a political task, and in that sense the honor belongs to Franklin. We will examine the main aspects of Franklin's life before moving on to list his contributions to the founding of the new nation.

Franklin, like Washington, had been groomed in the American school of business; but unlike Washington, his was an enterprise of the written word. His mission was to spread the word not only in America, but also to the world. By age forty-two, both men had reached prominent places in their society, north and south. At that age they had achieved a high degree of economic independence and could devote their endeavors to the commonwealth.

Both Washington and Franklin had strong physical constitutions. However, Franklin was more than twenty years older than the Virginian, and had a very different character. Whereas the young Washington towered in ambition, the young Franklin tended to naivete. His childhood friend, John Collins, squandered the money that Franklin had collected for his employer, a Mr. Vernon; and this left the young Franklin in debt. Later, William Keith, governor of Pennsylvania, sent Franklin on a mission to London, but did not send him with proper support. In London the story repeated itself; Franklin's friend James Ralph lived at Franklin's expense. This was not the last episode, but by then Franklin had learned not to be so naïve. His amiability, brightness, and constant striving toward self-improvement quickly compensated for other personality flaws.

Whereas Washington could bring the essence of the American experience within his reach through his enormous will, Franklin attained the same end through his travels and his interactions with people and ideas. During his visit to France in 1767 he wrote to friend Polly Stevenson: "Traveling is one way of strengthening life, at least in appearance. It is but a fortnight since we left London, but the variety of scenes we have gone through makes it equal to six months living in one place. Perhaps I have suffered a greater change, too, in my person, than I could have done in six years at home."

The Education of Benjamin Frnaklin

In his early youth Franklin was already a leader among his peers in their games. He had a yearning toward the ocean, which he associated with the idea of wanting to sail. In that we can see an intimation of his destiny, which took him across the ocean to Europe. In his adolescent years he had unusual preoccupations with moral and spiritual matters, as he showed in his experiments with abstention from meat and alcohol. These were existential questions that the young man wanted to explore through his own experience. His transition into adulthood around the age of twenty-one was fraught with many intense trials. In London he had contacted a group of young radical freethinkers and set out to prove "in a hundred axioms that he knew neither sin, nor liberty, nor personal immortality. God was only permitted to exist as a machine." He returned to Philadelphia feeling that he could have fallen into an abyss. Another abyss followed, one in which he almost lost his life after an attack of pleurisy. His friend and mentor, Thomas Denham, actually died from the illness they had contracted together. Of the depth of this experience we can gather some insight from his own words: "I suffered a good deal, gave up the point in my mind, and was rather disappointed when I found myself recovering; regretting in some degree that I must now some time or other have all that disagreeable work to do over again." That Franklin gained a glimpse into the spiritual world seems beyond doubt. The next year he composed the famous epitaph, in which he said the following about his corpse: "…for it will (as he believ'd) Appear once More in a New and More Elegant Edition Revised and Corrected by the Author." What has not been sufficiently highlighted about this turning point is that Franklin had a very deep spiritual experience. In present-day parlance, we could say he had a "Near Death Experience," and probably awakened memories of a previous life or lives, however faint they may have been. Thoughtful examination of the evidence reveals an already exceptional individual, now fully awakened through the power of the spirit to his life calling, and to tasks that were far from ordinary.

The spiritual experience had awakened astonishing insights for a man of the eighteenth century, insights coming from inner conviction rather than from borrowed knowledge. This was also the time in which Franklin formed "the *Junto*," or "Leather Apron Club," a club for mutual improvement, where he and his friends debated questions of science, morality, politics, and business. Four years before becoming a Freemason, Franklin had started this group that shared much of its philosophy with the Brotherhood. His later affiliation with Freemasonry formed a thread throughout his whole life.

A glimpse at what Franklin's mind could encompass is truly astonishing. We can look first at the speculative sciences. Franklin's discoveries about electricity are all the more remarkable, considering that he had little equipment, and gave little time to his experiments. His insights endure today in the definition of positive and negative fields.

More astonishing but little-known is Franklin's mathematical genius. Through his friendship with the statesman and natural scientist James Logan, Franklin had become acquainted with "mathematical magic squares." These are square tables of eight columns by eight rows filled with seemingly random numbers. The sum of each column or row as well as the diagonals yield the same constant number. Not only could Franklin replicate such squares on his own; he could also add a host of additional constant properties to the 8 x 8 squares and also do the same with 16 x 16 squares.[29] We can note in passing that everything that Franklin touched is far from ordinary. He discovered electricity almost like one would work on a hobby; and he could work at magic squares in his amateur fashion, but much in the way as trained mathematicians would. There seems to be hardly a limit to his genius.

Thus Franklin's mind could have excelled in speculative pursuits. On the other hand, Franklin's pursuit of knowledge led to many practical applications. His practical achievements may seem less impressive than the ones we just mentioned, but they had an immediate benefit for his community and the whole of the colonies. With the printing press he worked his way into his fellow citizen's minds through *Poor Richard's Almanac*. This condensed wisdom, summed up in a few words and peppered with humor, was particularly adapted to the ways of the New World. His declared intention was to: " …leave a strong impression on the memory of young persons."[30]

And Franklin's Contributions to the Commonwealth

Franklin's very approach toward knowledge is a radical departure from the ways of the academic world. His Leather Apron Club or *Junto* is a model of learning achieved in lively collaboration, the knowledge accessible to the "leather apron man"; that is, to the craftsman, and by extension, to all. Franklin understood that we learn from active interchange, and from life as much as from academic study. It is through the agency of the *Junto* that the Lending Library, the City Watch, and the American Philosophical Society were born. About the improvements brought by the City Watch, Franklin said: "…by preparing the minds of the people for the change, it paved the way for the law obtained a few years later, when the members of our clubs were grown into more influence." Here we see another of Franklin's capacities, the one that early Freemasonry stressed: the ability to guide through deeds, deliberately relinquishing ownership of the ideas. This implies the willingness to plant a seed and wait for its fruition in a completely detached way. Not only was Franklin able and willing to abandon the paternity of his ideas, but he also knew when the time was ripe for an idea, and when the idea would have to wait.

How much Franklin could achieve by turning to the practical and mundane can be illustrated by looking at his inventions that improved daily life. The so-called Franklin stove allowed a more efficient use of wood. The lightning rod protected homes from a major source of fires. On a larger scale, Franklin and his *Junto* were instrumental in bringing about the Union Fire Company, the first of its kind. Sixteen years later, the mature entrepreneur formulated the revolutionary idea of the Union Fire Insurance Company, allowing the extension of the services of the Union Fire Company to a much larger part of the population.

It was not just Franklin's ideas that had a pervasive influence among the colonies. His tasks as Postmaster for Philadelphia, and later as deputy Postmaster General for the

colonies, allowed him to cover a large territory. By age forty-two Franklin had achieved economic independence. He was also the Grand Master of Pennsylvania Freemasons. In his own world he had greatly contributed by holding a balance between the Quaker proprietors and the other forces of society, including the Freemasons. His presence was a key factor in defusing tensions between "centrifugal" tendencies; that is, tendencies that caused separation.

In the next twenty years his views expanded. His youthful wanderings in London played an important role in his education. In London, exposed to a rich cultural life, he came to see himself as a man of the British Empire. In his articles of belief at age twenty-two he had written: "…that I may be loyal to my Prince and faithful to my country, careful for its good, valiant in its defense, and obedient to its Laws, abhorring Treason as much as Tyranny."

Franklin's Idea of America

With good reason was Franklin called "the First American" before such an honor fell upon Washington's shoulders. The idea of America, of what made it different from any nation before that time, gradually matured in Franklin's mind. It is easy to underestimate Franklin's achievements because he lived in a world of ideas and personal relationships rather than one of heroic deeds. He was a man of peace, whom some have called a "reluctant incendiary." Franklin's views evolved: he first thought the British Empire could evolve; later he realized that America could blossom only away from the Empire. From that point on, he was not at liberty to speak his mind candidly. He often had to veil his words or hide them under the subterfuge of a convenient pen-name. That he could speak his mind at all was due to his reputation as scientist and philosopher, and the popularity that preceded him wherever he went. We can retrace the steps that Franklin took in spirit, and how they anticipated, as if in a blueprint, everything that later took shape in the world.

The first London exposure and the return to Philadelphia showed young Benjamin the disparity between the ideas of a cosmopolitan culture and the reality of Empire on the economic level. From his vantage point in the world of business, he could not fail to notice that disparity. As early as 1747, the colonies' agent to London was advocating freedom of trade among the colonies. The first direct criticisms of British imperialism and mercantilism appeared in 1751 in the *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of the Countries,…* . Here, in a yet timid way he was advising caution: "…Britain should not too much restrain manufactures in her colonies." He is more pointed on the hidden costs of slavery: "The labor of slaves can never be so cheap here as the labor of working men in Britain."

Franklin emerged as a political figure on the American continental scene with the Treaty of Albany of 1754. That year was also a turning point for his thinking in economic matters. To Governor Shirley he outlined the burdens that the Americans carried from the prevailing practice of Empire. He complained of the amount of indirect English taxes that the colonists had to pay; that is, the taxes incorporated into the English goods they imported. He perceived likewise the economic loss derived from enforced monopolistic purchases from and sales to England, given the preclusion of the colonies from other competitive markets. All of these impositions were in fact, as he claimed, additional unspoken taxes paid to England.

But Franklin realized that the major obstacle to union between the colonies was, first and foremost, their own internal rivalries. Already in 1751 Franklin had written to James Parker, referring to the Iroquois: " It would be a very strange thing if Six Nations of Ignorant Savages should be capable of forming a Scheme for such an Union and be able to execute it in such a manner, as that it has subsisted Ages, and appears indissoluble, and yet a like Union should be impracticable for ten or a dozen colonies."

By 1764, in what he could express privately to Peter Collinson, Franklin's views had evolved to a point hardly reconcilable with the prevailing English economic interests:

> In time perhaps mankind may be wise enough to let trade take its own course, find its own proportions, etc. At present, most of the edicts of princes, placaerts, laws, and ordinances of kingdoms and states for that purpose prove political blunders. The advantages they produce, not being general to the commonwealth, but particular to private persons or bodies in the state who procured them, and at the expense of the rest of the people.

Yet, for Franklin there was nothing economic that was not also a reflection of a human and moral dilemma. In the same letter he wrote: " I think there is scarce anything you can do that may be hurtful to us but what will be as much or more so to you." What was true of human relations in general was all the more true of nations, no matter how it was expressed or disguised under codified economic relationships.

We have seen that Franklin was a man of the Empire at first. However, his idea was an Empire other than what British imperialism could tolerate. It was an Empire of equal parts under one king. In it there could be no economic privileges sanctioned by political charter. The new politician clearly expressed this in 1754, at the Treaty of Albany. His *Plan for Settling Two Western Colonies* was a last-ditch effort to implement a larger Empire of equals. Had his efforts been heeded, perhaps the American War of Independence could have been averted.

Over time Franklin came to realize how entrenched were the commercial and economic interests intimately intertwined with Crown and Parliament. All of those he denounced cleverly or sarcastically in turn, often operating in disguise under the cover of a pen-name. A variety of articles, essays, and pamphlets culminated in *An Edict of the King of Prussia,* and *Rules by Which A Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One.* The second in particular, written in 1773, can be considered a forerunner of the Declaration of Independence. In it were listed the grievances of the colonists against the mother country, in twenty points. Franklin advised prudence, but stood firm for American rights. Thus, it was only natural that he would assume a central role in the Continental Congress and the drafting of the Declaration of Independence. Behind the scenes, he had already walked in spirit the steps leading to independence.

Franklin's idea of America evolved from a larger universal idea of Empire. His idea was almost a world federation before it turned by necessity into a specifically American federal system. The idea of the union of different parts, a sort of world brotherhood, came from Franklin's lifelong involvement with Freemasonry. After all, his spiritual brethren stretched to both sides of the ocean, as Franklin's later participation in French Freemasonry proved.

It was as a man of the world-at-large that Franklin promoted the idea of America in Europe. The American diplomat knew that if America were to become a new phenomenon in the world, it had to overcome deeply engrained cultural habits. While at home Washington was devising new ways to fight a battle of education, Franklin was fighting the diplomatic struggle that could win America's independence. He knew that he had to win over the French people. He also knew that he had to inaugurate a new era in international relations by trying to move away from political alliances and entanglements. He chose to focus on the arena of economic reciprocity—clearly stated mutual advantages—rather than the delicate balances of power at the mercy of a volatile political climate. In order to achieve this goal, he had to prevail over others such as Arthur Lee and John Adams, who still operated within the old frame of mind.

A last aspect of Franklin's political life, worth mentioning here, concerns his relationships with the Native Americans. In 1736 Franklin had published his first account of a peace treaty with the Indians. During the next twenty-six years Franklin published the accounts of another thirteen treaties. In the early 1750s he became an Indian Commissioner for Pennsylvania. He was surely familiar with the idea of federal union that the Iroquois chief Canassatego and other Indian chiefs advanced for the colonies. During the debate leading to the Treaty of 1744, Canassatego closed his speech with the following words: "Our wise forefathers established union and amity between the Five Nations. This has made us formidable. This has given us great weight and authority with our neighboring Nations. We are a powerful Confederacy; and by your observing the same methods our wise forefathers have taken, you will acquire much strength and power; therefore, whatever befalls you, do not fall out with one another."[31]

Franklin was defeated in his campaign for the Pennsylvania Assembly, probably for defending Indian rights during the episode of the Paxton massacre. After that episode, he wrote the impassioned text *A Narrative of the Late Massacres in Lancaster County of a Number of Indians, Friends of this Province, by Persons Unknown*.