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Benjamin Franklin: The Sage of America

Steven Forde



There was a time, not too long ago, when every schoolchild in America learned about Benjamin Franklin and his exploits; a great many read his brief *Autobiography*. Unfortunately, that time has passed. None of the American Founders is the icon he once was, of course, but in the case of Franklin, this is especially lamentable because Franklin addressed himself more to the common man, and to the young, than did his colleagues. He directed his writing largely to the formation of popular character and had a very salutary effect on that character for as long as he was widely read.

Life

Born in Boston in 1706, Franklin was older by a generation than most of his fellow Founders. The youngest son of youngest sons for five generations back, as he tells us with pride, Franklin necessarily made his own way in the world. He tried several trades before settling on printing, the one

mechanical trade that suited his bookish and searching mind.

While still very young, he read books of “polemic Divinity,” mostly attacks on Deism that he found in his father’s library. These books had an effect “quite contrary to what was intended by them,” Franklin tells us, and he became “a thorough Deist” by the time he was 15.¹ His unconventional religious beliefs, together with his fondness for disputing with his fellow Bostonians, contributed to his eventual need to depart for Philadelphia.

When only 16 and a printing apprentice to his brother James, he penned a series of essays under the pseudonym Silence Dogood, devoted to chiding the faults and encouraging the virtues of his fellow Bostonians. It was a device he returned to again and again. In Philadelphia, he wrote as the Busy-Body, a self-proclaimed *ensor morum*, and at other times as Alice Addertongue, Obadiah Plainman, Homespun, and of course Poor Richard, whose sententious proverbs (many gleaned from other sources) remain part of our heritage. Franklin considered newspapers (as well as almanacs) to be “another Means of communicating Instruction”² to the wider public and filled his out with small, edifying pieces. It was part of a larger educational project, to which his *Autobiography* also belongs.

Franklin’s curiosity extended not only to politics, morality, and theology, but also to science. He investigated natural phenomena from weather patterns to the Gulf Stream to electricity. He founded

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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

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Benjamin Franklin

Born

January 17, 1706, in Boston, Massachusetts; son of Josiah Franklin (tallow chandler and soap boiler who immigrated from England in 1683 to escape religious persecution) and Abiah Folger (Franklin) of Nantucket.

Childhood

Attended one year of grammar school and briefly had a private tutor; apprenticed at father's tallow shop and later learned the printing trade; worked for his brother James's newspaper, the *New-England Courant*, in 1721 before moving to Philadelphia to open a print shop.

Religion

Raised Presbyterian, but did not actively practice in adult life.

Family

At the age of 24, married Deborah Read on September 1, 1730; they had three children: William Franklin (1729 or 1730), Francis Folger Franklin (1732), and Sarah "Sally" Franklin (1743).

Accomplishments

- Purchased the *Pennsylvania Gazette* (1729).
- Published *Poor Richard's Almanack* (1732-1758).
- Clerk of the Pennsylvania Assembly (1736-1751).
- Deputy Postmaster of Philadelphia (1737-1753).
- Invented the Franklin stove (1741).
- Founded the American Philosophical Society (1743).
- Member, Pennsylvania Assembly (1751-1764).
- Founded what became the University of Pennsylvania (1751).
- Deputy Postmaster General for the colonies (1753-1774).
- Commissioner, Albany Congress (1754).
- Agent in England for Pennsylvania (1764-1775), Georgia (after 1768), New Jersey (after 1769), and Massachusetts (after 1770).
- Delegate, Second Continental Congress (1775-1776).
- Postmaster General of the United States (1775-1776).
- Agent of the United States to France (1776-1785).
- President of the Executive Council of Pennsylvania (1785-1788).
- President, Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery (1787-1790).
- Delegate, Constitutional Convention (1787).

Died

April 17, 1790, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he is buried at Christ Church.

Last Words

"A dying man can do nothing easy."

the American Philosophical Society to advance the cause of science in the New World. His research in electricity led to the discovery of the polarity of electrical current; his invention of the lightning rod and many other advances brought him international renown. He was admitted to the Royal Society of London and other European learned societies. Franklin was the only one of the Founders with an international reputation before independence, and that reputation was scientific.

Franklin's principle was "I shall never ask, never refuse, nor ever resign an office," and he was asked again and again.

After he became wealthy enough to retire from business (in his early forties), Franklin often expressed the desire to devote himself wholly to science, but the public would not let him. His reputation for selfless public service resulted in continual calls for more. His principle was "I shall never ask, never refuse, nor ever resign an office," and he was asked again and again. He was elected to the Pennsylvania Assembly repeatedly, beginning in 1750. He was appointed deputy postmaster for the colonies in 1753 and in 1754 was a delegate to an intercolonial congress that met in Albany to discuss dealing with the French and Indian War. Although it was rejected, he presented his Albany Plan for local independence within a framework of colonial union.

In 1757, he was made colonial agent for Pennsylvania in London. He lived in England for all but two of the years from 1757 to 1775, representing one or more of the colonies. These were the years when differences between the Americans and the mother country ripened into an open breach. Franklin strove mightily to prevent the rupture, but it proved impossible.

He returned to Philadelphia in 1775, only to be sent to Paris by the Continental Congress in 1776 as representative of the new United States to the French

court. There he negotiated a treaty of commerce and a defense alliance with France, which proved vital to the success of the American Revolution. Franklin also was a negotiator of the final peace treaty with Great Britain, which was signed in Paris in 1783.

Franklin returned home in 1785 and participated in the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Public knowledge that he and George Washington supported the proposed Constitution was perhaps as important as any other factor in securing its acceptance. One of his last public acts was to sign a petition to Congress, as president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, urging emancipation and the end of the slave trade.³ He died not long after the Constitution's ratification, in April 1790.

Although Franklin was at the center of some of the most momentous episodes of the American Founding, his thoughts and writings are devoted more to matters of culture and popular morality than to laws and institutions. In the end, he held that institutions matter less than the character of the people who sustain them. Thus his famous response to one who inquired what government the Framers had given the Americans: "a republic, if you can keep it." Only a populace with the proper temper can support a free government, making it the task of a Founder to shape not only institutions, but character as well.

Democratic Virtues

A free, egalitarian, and democratic society requires certain virtues in its citizens, virtues different from those that sustained the feudal and aristocratic societies of Europe. These are the virtues that Franklin aims to identify and cultivate.

Compared to feudal virtue—or the classical virtues of Aristotle or Cicero—Franklin's virtues appear so humble as to invite ridicule. The two he praises most, Industry and Frugality, would scarcely be regarded as virtues by aristocratic traditions. But Franklin's morality is designed for the common man: a new common man who must be self-reliant, a lover of liberty, and responsible in its exercise. The question Franklin had to ponder, and which we still

1. Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*, in Benjamin Franklin's *Writings*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay (New York: Library of America, 1987), p. 1359.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 1398.

3. Benjamin Franklin, "Petition from the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery," February 3, 1790, <http://www.ushistory.org/documents/antislavery.htm>.

must ponder, is what virtues does the common man need?

In his *Autobiography*, Franklin gives us a list of 13 virtues,⁴ along with a brief gloss on each:

- Temperance (Eat not to Dulness. Drink not to Elevation.)
- Silence (Speak not but what may benefit others or your self. Avoid trifling conversation.)
- Order (Let all your Things have their Places. Let each Part of your Business have its Time.)
- Resolution (Resolve to perform what you ought. Perform without fail what you resolve.)
- Frugality (Make no Expence but to do good to others or yourself: i.e. Waste nothing.)
- Industry (Lose no Time—Be always employ'd in something useful—Cut off all unnecessary Actions.)
- Sincerity (Use no hurtful Deceit. Think innocently and justly; and, if you speak, speak accordingly.)
- Justice (Wrong none, by doing Injuries or omitting the Benefits that are your Duty.)
- Moderation (Avoid Extreams. Forbear resenting Injuries so much as you think they deserve.)
- Cleanliness (Tolerate no Uncleaness in Body, Cloaths or Habitation.)
- Tranquility (Be not disturbed at Trifles, or at Accidents common or unavoidable.)
- Chastity (Rarely use Venery but for Health or Offspring; Never to Dulness, Weakness, or the Injury of your own or another's Peace or Reputation.)
- Humility (Imitate Jesus and Socrates.)

This is a homely list, to be sure, but remarkably similar to the curriculum urged today by those who want to revive basic moral instruction in schools. Franklin shares with them the project of laying a solid foundation for democratic citizenship. The first building blocks of that foundation are not less important for being so humble.

It is important to bear in mind that the audience for whose edification Franklin proposed his list was the common folk of America, not its elite. These were the people on whose virtues a prosperous democracy would be built or on whose vices it would founder. Franklin recognized two distinctive features of American society. First, Americans began life with little and needed to make their own way. Second, America provided sufficient opportunity that prosperity was within the reach of almost anyone who was willing to work for it. This is a recipe for tremendous economic development and social happiness, but only if the human soil is properly prepared.

Franklin recognized two distinctive features of American society: Americans began life with little and needed to make their own way, and America provided sufficient opportunity that prosperity was within the reach of almost anyone who was willing to work for it.

Our contemporaries have rediscovered the truth that even capitalism depends upon certain virtues that do not appear spontaneously. Curiously, the incentive of personal prosperity is insufficient without a willingness to pursue prosperity honestly and industriously. Not only work and postponed gratification, but trust and trustworthiness are necessary to commerce, and these traits do not come into being on their own.

Franklin's writing emphasizes both the importance of these virtues and the obstacles to their development. In his 1758 *Almanack*, Franklin strung

4. Franklin, *Autobiography*, in *Writings*, pp. 1384–1385.

Poor Richard's Almanack

Ben Franklin's famous Poor Richard's Almanack was an annual calendar and datebook that included practical suggestions, astrological signs, and weather predictions. One of the most popular and influential works in colonial America (John Paul Jones, for instance, named his ship the Bonhomme Richard, after Poor Richard), Franklin started the almanac in 1731 when he was 26 and continued to publish it until 1757.

Franklin wrote under the pseudonym of Richard Saunders—hence Poor Richard—a simpleminded astronomer and hen-pecked country husband who filled the almanac with common-sense advice and homespun stories. Each edition offered several witty but practical aphorisms, many now famous, such as:

- "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise."
- "Never leave that till to-morrow which you can do to-day."
- "Penny wise, pound foolish."
- "God helps them that help themselves."

The famous saying "A penny saved is a penny earned" is actually a popularization of Franklin's original "A Penny sav'd is Twopence clear," which better reflects Franklin's encouragement of accumulated saving.

Over time, Poor Richard became a significant voice for and a popular teacher of Franklin's philosophy that thrift, duty, hard work, and simplicity are not only good qualities, but also lead to success, but it is incorrect to assume that Franklin's message is merely utilitarian. Many of his best proverbs on business and public life were collected in the preface to the 1757 final edition, called "The Way to Wealth," which ends with this advice: "Do not depend too much upon your own industry, and frugality and prudence, though excellent things, for they may all be blasted without the blessing of Heaven; and therefore ask that blessing humbly, and be not uncharitable to those that at present seem to want it, but comfort and help them."

together many of Poor Richard's proverbs on economy as a harangue on "The Way to Wealth" by one Father Abraham.⁵ Poor Richard listens to the speech and then observes that "The People heard it, and approved the Doctrine, and immediately practiced the contrary." A premature taste for luxury, the allure of get-rich-quick schemes (Philadelphians were digging up the riverbanks on rumors of pirate treasure), and idle or self-destructive amusements all may seduce people from the straight and narrow (if not short) path to prosperity and, in so doing, even derail general economic health.

Franklin could be quite strict toward those who turned their back on his exhortations. Despite his affinity with the common man, he had little patience for the folly that led people astray. His reflections on the English poor laws, based upon his years in London, are remarkably harsh by today's standards. Poor laws, he thought, risked falling into that species

of misdirected charity that "tends to flatter our natural indolence, to encourage idleness and prodigality, and thereby to promote and increase poverty."⁶ Legitimate relief is one thing, but in excess, "may it not be found fighting against the order of God and Nature, which perhaps has appointed Want and Misery as the proper Punishments for, and Cautions against as well as necessary consequences of Idleness and Extravagancy."

Franklin earnestly wished the well-being of the common man but was firm in his insistence that that well-being be earned. Only in this way would the social, as well as the individual, good be served.

Social Entrepreneurship

The economic virtues are so prominent in Franklin's writing because of their importance to his audience, but they are the foundation or beginning, not the whole, of his moral teaching. He does not

5. Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanack* (1758), in *Writings*, pp. 1294-1303.

6. Benjamin Franklin, *On the Labouring Poor*, in *Writings*, p. 623.

consider prosperity the only purpose in life or the only requisite of a healthy republic. Economic self-reliance is in reality only one aspect of the sturdy individualism that democracy requires. It is only a precondition of the other virtues of citizenship proper.

For Franklin, the heart of morality is doing good to one's fellow man. His mature theology was a providential Deism whose fundamental principle was that "the most acceptable Service of God is doing Good to Man."⁷ In Franklin's own life, this service took many forms.

- His legendary ingenuity was an exhaustless source of ideas for public benefit.
- His scientific observations produced the lightning rod and the Franklin stove.
- He conceived the American Philosophical Society as an instrument for the spread of "Useful Knowledge" to the benefit of mankind.
- His *Autobiography* presents for our imitation his efforts to improve night watches, streetlights, and street cleaning and his organizing of fire and civil defense brigades.
- He mustered support for the first public library, hospital, and school in Philadelphia.

In each of these cases, the initiative was his, but the organized efforts of many were required to bring them to fruition.

In relating these episodes, Franklin wishes to draw our attention not to the individual improvements, but to the model of public-spirited social entrepreneurship they represent. Franklin is firmly of the opinion that "one Man of tolerable Abilities may work great Changes" for the good if he forms a plan and pursues it diligently.⁸ Not exceptional ability, but a devotion to the public good and the discipline to pursue it are the qualities Franklin relies on. These are qualities many can share in, and Franklin wishes as many as possible to share them.

Franklin was not against government taking over many of the tasks he describes, but he saw that the health of a democratic society rests on individuals' willingness to devote time to the public good. Poor Richard once counseled, "The first Mistake in publick Business, is the going into it," but there are many opportunities for public-spirited action outside of politics, and as Tocqueville was to argue later, a successful democracy must have citizens able and willing to seize those opportunities. Poor Richard, like Silence Dogood and the Busy-Body before him, insistently, if gently, pushes his readers to good citizenship. Franklin's *Autobiography* does the same while showing the way to higher forms of public service, even politics, for those with the talent and leisure.

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Education to Liberty

Economic self-reliance and public-spirited citizenship presuppose the political liberty that is necessary for both to flourish. Political liberty in turn requires free institutions and a public character that will sustain them.

Franklin's attempt to secure this character is best seen in a set of proposals he penned for a public school in Philadelphia.⁹ "Genius without Education is like Silver in the Mine," wrote Poor Richard.¹⁰ Franklin proposes to "mine" this genius with a new approach to education. Rejecting the European model, which emphasized classical learning and catered to the needs and tastes of a privileged class, Franklin wishes his students to learn principally what they will need to be efficient tradesmen and vigilant democratic citizens.

For trade, his pupils learn basic mathematics and accounting, clear writing, and living rather

7. Franklin, *Autobiography*, in *Writings*, p. 1382.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 1397.

9. Benjamin Franklin, "Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania," 1749, <http://www.archives.upenn.edu/primdocs/1749proposals.html>.

than dead languages. His education for democratic citizenship is more complex. Franklin conveys this education principally through the study of history. The vividness of historical example drives home the advantages of virtue and the disadvantages of vice, illustrates the importance of public religion, and, says Franklin, reveals the superiority of Christianity in this role.

The sturdy individualism that begins with economic self-reliance culminates for Franklin in an enlightened jealousy for political liberty. His political curriculum aims to fix this vigilance and pugnacity in the American character.

History also teaches the great advantages of society, how it serves the security and property of men as well as the advancement of arts and human comforts. Finally, it makes students sensible of “The Advantages of *Liberty*, Mischiefs of *Licentiousness*, Benefits arising from good Laws and a due Execution of Justice, &c. Thus may the first Principles of sound *Politicks* be fix’d in the Minds of Youth.”¹¹

Franklin educates his pupils to a sage and vigilant citizenship. Thomas Jefferson reflected the same aspiration in his educational writings: Democratic citizens must cultivate certain personal virtues, to be sure, but they must also become aware of the social preconditions of liberty and learn to recognize the threats to it. This requires a fairly sophisticated political education. In his *Autobiography*, Franklin suggests that the spread of public libraries in the colonies, a trend begun by him in Philadelphia, played a role in the vigilance of the colonists on behalf of their liberties and their willingness to stand “in Defense of their Privileges.”¹²

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Democracy and Leadership

Though Franklin’s primary concern was the diffusion of enlightenment and democratic virtues throughout the populace, he was concerned also with leadership. While many in the “neo-classical” 18th century were inspired by ancient models of leadership, by Cato or Brutus or Publius, Franklin undertook the project of devising a new type of leadership appropriate for the coming democratic age.

To be sure, leadership is a less pressing need in a healthy democratic society, one where the public-spirited virtues Franklin describes have wide currency. These in a sense spread leadership in the form of citizen initiative across the population. But that does not eliminate entirely the need for great leadership from the best citizens. Paradoxically, the very virtues of democracy make such leadership more difficult.

Aristocratic societies have a norm of deference, a recognition of superiority, and a presumption of its right to lead. In an egalitarian society, the reverse is almost true: Pretensions to superiority are resented and leadership itself typically called into question. This is partly a consequence of democracy’s insistence on the equality of men, its individualism, and its self-reliance. One can see both the pride and the resentment of democracy in Poor Richard’s dictum, “A Plowman on his Legs is higher than a Gentleman on his Knees.”¹³ Franklin developed a style of leadership to deal with this prickly and, on the whole, admirable individualism.

The mode of democratic leadership is persuasion, not coercion. One of Franklin’s earliest lessons, he tells us in his *Autobiography*, was that a contentious or imperious style is self-defeating. Rather than persuading men, it offends their pride and accomplishes nothing. When dealing with pugnacious egalitarians, a more humble presentation is more effective and creates more pleasant social relations in the bargain.

Franklin discovered that his public-spirited proposals often encountered resistance rooted in envy.

10. Franklin, *Poor Richard’s Almanack* (1750), in *Writings*, p. 1259.

11. Franklin, “Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania.”

12. Franklin, *Autobiography*, in *Writings*, p. 1372.

13. Franklin, *Poor Richard’s Almanack* (1746), in *Writings*, p. 1238.

No matter how beneficial the project, some would refuse to follow if they thought it would elevate the leader above the rest. Franklin therefore began to present projects as the initiative of “a number of friends” or “publick-spirited Gentlemen,” even if the initiative was wholly his. This greatly smoothed the way by removing the issue of personal credit or honor. Besides, Franklin wryly notes, if someone else tried to take credit for the project, envy itself unmasked the pretender and returned the credit to him.

This method of leadership by stealth, as it were, is one of Franklin’s most important lessons to those who would advance the public good in a democratic milieu. He himself applied it systematically. He formed one group, the Junto, both as a private forum for discussion and as a surreptitious instrument for leading public opinion. One of the functions of the group was to brainstorm publicly beneficial ideas. If the group found one, its members were to drum up wider support without revealing their cabal of a few as the source. We find in Franklin’s writings more than one blueprint for such secret societies of virtuous men, who would use their collective but hidden influence to move public affairs toward the good.

It is not that Franklin was secretive or conspiratorial by nature or that he had a fundamental distrust of the democratic public, but he did believe that that public could be led effectively only by those who respected its pride and realized that its resentments needed to be taken into account. He often exerted leadership through alter egos—Silence Dogood, the Busy-Body, Poor Richard—who were disarming in their ordinariness.

Franklin himself eventually became one of the most trusted and heeded men in America, partly because of his reputation for humility. Yet humility, he tells us in the *Autobiography*, is a virtue he possessed only by appearance. He also tells us that in such matters, appearance is enough. It was by a kind of benevolent deceit (see his gloss on the virtue of Sincerity) that he became such an effective servant of the public good. He counsels us to do likewise.

Franklin found this approach congenial partly because, however exceptional he was, his background was thoroughly common. He had great patience with the oft-unjustified resentments of the

common man because he knew that the pride from which it stemmed was one of the signature traits of the new democratic culture and was, on the whole, a salutary thing.

American Sage

Franklin was more interested in democratic culture and its health than were many others in the founding generation. His thoughts on the subject are most timely today, when we are wondering afresh what the underpinnings of a healthy democratic culture are and whether we still possess them. Franklin, writing at a time when American democracy was just maturing from its colonial roots, had much the same perspective. It led him to a concern for certain key virtues that his countrymen needed to develop or solidify.

First were economic virtues like Industry and Frugality. These are the virtues Poor Richard emphasizes most, the virtues with which Franklin is typically identified. The reason is that economic independence, honestly come by, is the precondition of all else in a nation where inherited wealth is a rarity and self-reliance a trait with more than economic implications. The sturdy individualism it fosters is the backbone of the American political system.

But this individualism too must be led in the proper direction. It must be wedded to a love of liberty; pride is here its ally. It must also become sage, recognizing the social preconditions of liberty, its beneficial effects, and the threats to it. This is the portion of his project that Franklin most entrusted to schooling, for these are lessons taught by history.

Finally, our self-reliant individualists must become public-spirited citizens. Democracy requires that a concern for the common good and an initiative for advancing it be diffused throughout the populace. Some of Franklin’s most vigorous efforts were devoted to cultivating this in his fellow citizens. His greatest monument is an *Autobiography* that shows us how a life dedicated to all these virtues, public-spiritedness above all, can be supremely happy and supremely enviable.

—**Steven Forde** is Professor of Political Science at the University of North Texas and the author of several essays on Benjamin Franklin.