

## **Benjamin Franklin and the Traditions of American Diplomacy**

**by Harvey Sicherman**

The Robert Strausz-Hupé Memorial Lecture

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I'm delighted to see a nice crowd tonight to mark the memory of our founder Robert Strausz-Hupé and also to hear about Benjamin Franklin and the traditions of American diplomacy. I thought I might spend just a moment or two telling you about how Franklin got to Strausz-Hupé.

This story begins when we decided last year, in honor of our 50th anniversary, to create the Benjamin Franklin award. In the course of doing that, we purchase a set of rare books, including the secret correspondence of Benjamin Franklin, to present to our first honoree, Henry Kissinger. As is my wont, I decided to read the book before giving it to him. I expected to find the usual folderol, balderdash and pleasantries that had been my burden to read when I was in the Department of State. I was quite surprised to discover the language and the tenor of this exchange in the Franklin correspondence. A British acquaintance warns him that he should take personal care lest some harm befall him, and Franklin writes back saying that at his age, becoming a martyr for his country would be a fitting way to go out. And by the way, is he acquainted with Mr. X, who unannounced asked for a meeting in a remote part of woods near Paris? Which Mr. Franklin refused, being familiar with neither the person nor the location. This is the kind of language that you find in there, and it was quite refreshing to read.

Not long after that, we had international visitors to FPRI, one of whom was a professor from Russia. When I mentioned in introducing them that we were celebrating the 300th anniversary of Franklin's birth, she said to me "Oh, Benjamin Franklin is known to every Russian, and is very influential in our country." I said "Surely because of his scientific attainments?" and she said "No, his face is on the American \$100 bill." No doubt Benjamin Franklin is known that way in North Korea, too.

So I thought, maybe there's something to this, not only to the Franklin story, more than I had imagined, but also possibly that his influence, particularly on American diplomacy, may have had, or perhaps should have had, an impact to this very day.

There was another resemblance between Strausz-Hupé's career and Franklin's. Both fled from someplace else, hoping to make fame and fortune in Philadelphia; both were known for their scholarly and, in Franklin's case, scientific, achievements before they got into diplomacy; and both got into diplomacy well after most other men had retired, in Strausz-

Hupé's case at the age of 65, for nearly twenty years thereafter, and in Franklin's case, at the age of 70, for at least eight years thereafter.

Finally, there was one other thing that joined them together that I found quite fascinating. When I visited Strausz-Hupé in 1983, when he was ambassador to Turkey, he assembled a group of Turkish scholars and intellectuals. We were discussing some issue or another and Strausz-Hupé excused himself to attend to something. When he went out, one of the Turkish intellectuals, who very clearly looked to France for his inspiration, said to me, "You know, he's very American." Those of you who knew the late Robert Strausz-Hupé, an Austrian immigrant who never really lost his accent and had all the habits of a European, will appreciate that this was an odd comment to make. And yet it was clear that abroad, Strausz-Hupé struck everyone as American, while at home he struck everyone as not American.

The same thing apparently happened with Franklin, as we will see. In Europe and in the French court, he was considered to be the quintessential American. And yet in the U.S., he was somehow not quite an American, and had the appearance or at least the habits that a lot of people associated with foreigners. So with all that in mind, we thought that a talk about Benjamin Franklin and the traditions of American diplomacy would certainly be in order to honor not only the memory of Robert Strausz-Hupé but also in honoring Benjamin Franklin, two very American stories.

I have organized this talk into two parts: first, to examine what Franklin did and how he did it; and the second is to try to draw out some lessons from that experience that should provide us with American diplomatic traditions, those things that deserve to be passed down from one generation to the next as truths to which Americans should pay special attention when they're dealing with other countries.

Franklin's diplomatic achievements are centered around three items: first, the 1778 alliance with France that was essential for the military and diplomatic success of the American War of Independence--it took him ten months to achieve that; second, the 1783 peace treaty, which confirmed American Independence. In between came his third achievement, the raising of vast sums of money largely on credit and a prayer that amounted in the case of the French royal government--largely borrowed—to the equivalent many billions in 2006 dollars. It was such a huge sum that the burden of paying it off led directly to the decision by King Louis XVI to convene the estates general, which hadn't been convened since the time of his grandfather, Louis XIII, and from that estates general eventually sprang the French Revolution itself. Thus in a way the financing of the American Revolution contributed to the onset of the French Revolution, certainly not Franklin's intent.

How did he do this? When Franklin arrived in Paris on December 21, 1776, he was accompanied by two boys: one, his grandson William Temple Franklin, 16 years old, the son of his illegitimate son; and the other Benjamin Franklin (Benny) Bache, the 7-year-old son of his daughter Sally Bache. For a man of 70 to be accompanied by two boys of

that age gives some indication in and of itself that this was going to be a very unusual voyage.

When Franklin arrived at the behest of the American committee on secret correspondence, the equivalent of the foreign affairs section of the new American government, which was the Congress of the United States, he had a few things going for him. The first was that he was the best known American in the world. He had been honored by Louis XV in a public ceremony for his scientific attainments having to do with electricity, the stove, the Gulf Stream, the invention of a musical instrument called the armonica in a century where people were wild about music. Of course he also had a considerable reputation as a journalist, his fortune having originated from printing. He was independently wealthy. He did not really need for anybody to pay him anything.

He had a second big advantage. He hated the British. Now, this may be a bit of a surprise, but he had been humiliated by the British, before which he had been an ardent British imperialist well known for extolling the virtues of the British empire. He had been an agent in London, he had a great deal of familiarity with the English, a lot of friends there, and yet because of this humiliation, he had developed a hatred of the British that was shared by the French.

So he was coming to a country that had fought four wars in eighty years with Britain, that was still smarting over what we call the French and Indian wars of 1763 that had deprived the French of their possessions of Canada, their northern possessions, and a gaggle of other valuable colonies and where the previous king, Louis XV, had actually gone forward with a plan to invade the British Isles, didn't have the resources, and under Louis XVI a challenge was being actively planned and a naval build-up requisite to that challenge was supposed to peak in 1778. This was not necessarily known to Franklin or to anybody else widely, but that was the French plan. So the desire to take revenge on the British was very strong, and Franklin shared that hatred.

Only one other American, at least in my examination, shared such sentiments, and that was George Washington, apparently for similar reasons. So there was an emotional factor here in Franklin that perfectly matched the temperament of the government with which he had to deal.

The French government in fact was already supporting the American rebellion, although on a small scale, even before Franklin had arrived, so he had something to build on. But against all these things there were enormous obstacles. The first was that although the most famous American, he was also suspect. We should remind ourselves that the American Revolution was also the first American civil war. In Franklin's case, his illegitimate son was the royal governor of New Jersey. And on July 4, 1776, not long after the father affixed his signature to the Declaration of Independence, an official arrest warrant was served on the son, who was already in custody. Franklin broke with his son. They never really reconciled, even though before their relationship had been quite warm.

So Franklin himself despite this background was suspected from that day until his dying day of somehow not being quite American, partly because he spent so many years abroad and partly because of his own well-known reputation as being an advocate of the British cause.

Another problem he had was that he was not the only commissioner who had been dispatched to get help from the French. There was Silas Dean, who was involved in contracting and buying things, and then there was Arthur Lee, whose distinguishing characteristic was his antagonism toward anyone who had the misfortune of trying to work with him. These were the two commissioners who saddled Franklin when he arrived in France.

Another telling problem was his age. He was 70 years old in 1776. To be 70 years old in the 18th century, especially if you had arisen from nobody, from the poorest classes, was a miracle. Hardly anyone whom Franklin knew as a young man was still alive. To give you the ages of some of the others, George Washington was 43, Thomas Jefferson was 32, and John Adams was 38. So Franklin was indeed a very senior fellow who very often expressed his ignorance of whether the day he was writing the letter in question would be his last, who had begun to suffer some serious physical difficulties. He had gout. In the 18th century, everyone knew that gout had something to do with rich living, if they didn't know exactly which part of it. There were lots of remedies; none of them had to do with abstinence from port wine and cheese, which seem to have been a large part of the problem; certainly Franklin had no intentions of abstaining and sought every other excuse imaginable not to do anything about his diet. But when it struck him--and those of us who have ever had gout myself included know how disabling that can be—he was indeed disabled and had to fast almost for weeks before it would settle down, after which he resumed his former routine.

More seriously than that, he developed a kidney stone. In the 18th century, doctors knew how to remove kidney stones. Their operations were generally 100% successful, followed by nearly 100% mortality on the body from which the stone had been removed. Franklin was what we today would call a bit of a health nut. He believed in fresh air; he didn't like crowded, smelly cities or inadequate sanitation. There exists a curious note from John Adams, with whom Franklin was compelled to share a bed on an early mission to try to get the Canadian campaign underway, and where Adams wanted to keep the window closed. Franklin said "No, that's very unhealthy." And so as Adams told the story, Franklin began to talk about his theory, which had the beneficial effect of putting Adams and Franklin to sleep before it was over. Franklin knew enough not to undergo any such operation for his "gravel," as he put it, but to try to figure out some way to live with it.

He was taking the revolutionary cause to royalist France, a French court constricted by a thousand years of protocol, not looking very highly on the ill-born such as Franklin, prepared to give a role to scientists and others who had attained things, but basically not prepared at all to accept a fellow like Franklin as any kind of equal. Franklin was only partly familiar with this protocol, which was quite severe, and in any event had an insuperable difficulty in mastering it, namely that he did not understand or speak French

well. It was always noted during those years that in large public gatherings Franklin said very little. It wasn't because he wasn't loquacious, but because he was afraid of not being able to speak properly. He was surrounded by all kinds of people chattering with him all the time, very little of which he understood, so in sending a man like Franklin to carry a cause which was inherently not popular with the royalist government and with an imperfect understanding of not only the protocol but the language itself was quite a considerable hazard.

There was one more big problem. He was surrounded by spies. He joked once that if his valet were found out to be a spy, he wouldn't disqualify him on that account if he was otherwise a good valet. The fact is that most of the people around him were spies. The British secret service under Sir William Eden was extremely efficient; the master who was employed in finding out things about the Americans was a Paul Wentworth, native of Massachusetts; among his other recruits was Edward Bancroft, the secretary more or less of the commission; Franklin employed his grandson Temple to be his personal secretary, but the secretary shared by all three commissioners was Edward Bancroft. Bancroft was on both payrolls. He made a lot of money out of the Revolution. He left an account, which was found in the 1880s, when the London public records opened up 100 years of their secret files, of exactly what he did, down to the last paper. Bancroft complained often to the commissioners that he had so much writing to do that he felt that his hand was going to fall off. Well he did, because he had to transcribe things for them, and then transcribe a copy for the British, often in the same day. He had a little drop in the woods, and this information was of course promptly transferred to the very able British ambassador, Lord Stormont.

To make matters even worse than that, when Franklin wrote a letter to go to the United States, he would entrust it to a courier who was vouched for by the French government. This courier on the way to the docks made a side trip to the British embassy, where, using some kind of chemical action, the seals were lifted, the letter read or transcribed, and then the seals replaced so that no one would notice. In other words, everything that Franklin wrote, said, or did was known to the British government, sometimes even before he did it.

Franklin's approach to the issue of spying was at once both nervous and cavalier. He said that he never said anything in private that he didn't say in public, which in both cases wasn't all that much, and so he didn't care if people knew what he was doing. But on the other hand, we have the record of one would-be spy, who, seeking to ingratiate himself with Franklin, sent him a bottle of Madeira. The man was promptly arrested by the Paris police. He left a record of his interrogation. He sat in front of a small panel of officials who first compelled him to drink some of the wine, thus making clear that it wasn't poisonous, and then with an array of instruments of torture providing the background, he was urged to tell the story of what he was trying to do. Which he did, and sat in jail for about 90 days. He was a would-be spy—he hadn't cashed his check yet, as it were, and so he was eventually released for lack of evidence. Later he did go on the British payroll.

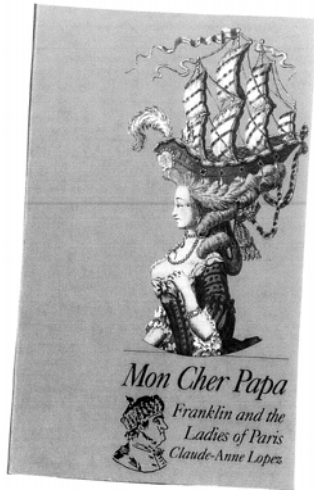
So you see that Franklin was very wary of what might be an attempt to poison him, but he was much less wary of the simple transfer of information.

What was Franklin's task? He had an instruction from the Congress, the committee, which read as follows: "It will be proper to press for the immediate and explicit declaration from France in our favor upon a suggestion that a reunion with Great Britain may be the consequence of a delay." This sounded fine, but was totally impractical. He had to go to the French foreign minister, Vergennes, who was a man quite famous not only for his abstemious habits, his frugality, and his hard work, but one of the best diplomats in Europe. And he had to say in effect to this man "You know what? If you don't run the risk of going to war with Britain by helping us, we may just reconcile with the British." Well, the only reconciliation with the British on the part of the revolutionaries was the gallows. So this was not a very persuasive argument.

But what really undercut the argument was that when Franklin arrived, the Americans had lost the battle of Long Island, which more or less demonstrated that George Washington was many things, but a competent general he was not, and on top of which the attempt to take Canada had also failed. So as a result, Franklin was in the odious position of trying to get French assistance, which would be a risk to France, in case they got into a premature war with the British, on behalf of a revolution that it was not clear knew how to use any of the equipment that the French might supply to the revolutionaries.

During this ten-month period, until the battle of Saratoga changed things around, how exactly did Franklin manage to keep the revolutionary cause alive in Paris? It's interesting to note that both Adams and Jefferson were invited to accompany Franklin, but they declined to do so on grounds that the mission was likely to be a failure. That's how he ended up with the two boys instead of the other two. The way he conducted himself during those ten months and the system that he set up were instrumental to preserving the cause in his darkest hour and later to the triumphs that followed.

He was what we would call today a spinner, a master spinner. He portrayed himself the way the court and the people of France wanted to see him.



Source: Claude-Anne Lopez, *Mon Cher Papa: Franklin and the Ladies of Paris* (Yale, 1966).

Take a look at the illustrations to prove my point. The lady wears the hat of Independence, a French warship sailing to help America, which was all the rage in Paris for a few months after the French recognized the revolutionary government in 1778. There we have Madame weighed down and propped up. It's quite an elaborate piece. It's also an example of what was thought in Paris to be the typical frippery. This was the ancien regime in its last stages, where people tried to outdo each other in luxury. King Louis was only 23 years old, Marie Antoinette was barely 20, they had a well-known taste for these types of displays and of course no idea of how much anything cost. And yet, down below, there is an image of Franklin in his coonskin cap. He wore the cap on the voyage across the Atlantic in winter to keep his head warm. He didn't wear a wig, didn't powder his hair, and he discovered that this was an extremely popular image

because it fit the French notion that the Americans were some kind of a new race, a new form of humankind purged of all the dross and the excesses of the Old World, new and simple.

So Franklin took it upon himself to appear as if he were some sort of backwoods sage. Now, of course, nothing could have been further from the truth. He had no experience of the countryside and in fact hated it. He was a very cosmopolitan fellow, and the idea of posing as a simpleton was for him a thespian challenge that he used with relish but hardly reflected the reality of what he was about. Nonetheless, he was willing to carry this pose to extreme instances. When he was presented to the court and to the king, instead of wearing an expensive, bemedaled uniform, draped with silver and gold, he wore a plain brown suit, carried his hat under his arm. This was in violation of all the protocols, but nevertheless exceedingly popular with everyone. In fact, he became so popular that the king himself got annoyed, and when one of the queen's ladies-in-waiting gushed excessively about Franklin, the king had a porcelain chamber pot made with an image of Franklin at the bottom, and sent it to the lady as an indication of his royal displeasure.

So Franklin's guise as the simple backwoods sage was an extremely effective one. He did more than that. While keeping himself a popular sensation, he had something for everybody. The Academy of Sciences, where there was a famous embrace with the dying Voltaire; the Masonic Lodge—the "Nine Sisters Lodge." We forget how important the Masons were as an international organization at that time. A third of that lodge consisted of actual clergymen, a Masonic lodge was all the rage, and at one time when that lodge did get into trouble, notably over the ceremonies of Voltaire's death, it was Franklin who stepped into the breach, got himself elected grand master, and smoothed things out with the government.

So although he was very thoroughly a part of the French intelligentsia, notoriously anti-government, he was also very much in with the royalists, because he constantly stressed

that the revolution was not against all kings, but against the English. And he was very careful about that. He went so far as to refer both in France and then later even in the United States to Louis XVI as the father of American independence. So he cultivated that. Occasionally there would be a slip. He was playing a chess game, something that was a favorite enterprise of his, with the elderly Duchess of Bourbon, she made a mistake and allowed her king to be checked; Franklin, who always insisted upon rules except when they didn't serve in his favor, checkmated the king and removed it from the board. The Duchess, aware of the errors, hers and his, said "In France we do not take kings so." To which Franklin replied, "In America, we do." This was widely reported, as was the remark of the heir to the Austrian throne, who, when asked why he was not enthusiastic about Franklin's vigorous chess playing, said "I am a king by trade."

But by and large Franklin was very careful not to get on the wrong side of royalist opinion. He was a great fixture at salon society. This was the age when the French ladies, even those who were not so well born but had some money, organized disputations, intellectual discussions that would start in the middle of the afternoon and last half the night, where all the main intellects, scientists, and politicians of the realm were expected to gather. Franklin got in with that crowd very quickly. He had as his house a mansion that was lent to him by one of Vergennes' friends, Chaumont, who was a rich businessman. When Franklin inquired about the rent, Chaumont said "First you'll win the revolution, then we'll see about the rent." You can imagine how this kind of arrangement hit John Adams when he arrived.

Franklin spent a lot of time at two houses in particular, those of the Brillons and of Madame Helvetius. Monsieur Brillon was hellbent to bring to bed the governess of his children. His wife, Anne-Louise Boivin d'Hardancourt Brillon de Jouy, twenty-five years younger, was one of the most beautiful women in France, and it was upon her that Franklin turned his attentions. Now there is extant a letter from Madame d'Hardancourt Brillon to Franklin in 1778 which reads as follows: "Do you know, my good papa, that people have criticized the sweet habit I have developed of sitting on your lap? And your habit of soliciting from me what I always refuse? People see evil everywhere in this miserable country. But one must submit to what is called propriety." Mme Helvetius, to whom he actually did propose marriage, is on record on a number of occasions as trying to put him off his ardors. When he suffered an attack of the gout, she said to him that if you only lived in a more wholesome way, this wouldn't happen to you. He said to her that in his earlier years, when he was very active sexually, he never got the gout. Now that Mme Helvetius and others refused him and he was inactive sexually, he had come down with the malady. So it should be within her Christian kindness to relief his illness. This is typical of the badinage that went back and forth among these different women and Franklin.

And yet Franklin in a way mistook what all this meant. He tried to get his son married to the Brillons' daughter. They politely but firmly refused. Mme Helvetius turned down his proposals for marriage. It never seemed to have registered on him that, given his social background, and given also that he was a foreigner and a Protestant to boot, in the French society existing then, he might indeed be welcomed as a savant and as a wit, and as an

interesting character, but that was about as far as it would go. So we see in these relationships in the salon Franklin's ability to ingratiate himself and yet from time to time as when dealing with the royalists a slip that could have gotten him into serious trouble because of a misjudgment.

Last and certainly not least, there was the issue of money and trying to raise it and spending it. Part of this was also facilitating the movement of volunteers. Both of these subjects drove Franklin to near despair. The money he had to deal with was paper money, for the most part. You may remember the phrase "not worth a continental." These were the continentals. He wrote once, in a very heavy irony, "this currency as we managed it was a wonderful machine. It paid and clothed the troops, provided victuals and ammunition. And when we were obliged to issue a quantity excessive, it paid itself off by depreciation." But of course, this made life very difficult for him, in making promises and sometimes having to cover those promises with his own financial means in order to get the thing done.

The volunteers also drove him mad. There was an endless supply of French officers who hadn't fought in years wanting to do something, presenting themselves with all sorts of credentials, promising that they would whisper the secret of victory to General Washington but of course needed a rank of major-general in order to be able to get close to General Washington. And although there were some notable picks—Pulaski, von Steuben and Lafayette were among those that Franklin recommended—General Washington had to write Franklin begging him not to send any more of these volunteers, who invariably wanted high office but not exposure to battle.

All this was how Franklin in a way enveloped and stimulated French society to pay attention to him and what he was doing and how he was doing it, so that the American cause, through his person, was popular in very many aspects of French society that mattered most. But to Vergennes, what really mattered most was what was going on in America. These ten months that Franklin managed to keep the American cause alive were finally redeemed at the Battle of Saratoga on October 17, 1777, when British General Burgoyne was forced to surrender at Saratoga with his entire army, which had foolishly marched down from Canada. Franklin was vindicated. He had been a colonel in the militia, by the way, been elected to it, had no experience of battle, but had been one of those who had provisioned the ill-fated Braddock march. He had an idea that a European army that marched through the American woods was not going to come to any good, so when Burgoyne's army didn't come to any good, in a way, Franklin was vindicated, and this made him the toast of the town.

In November, the British secret service agent Wentworth approached him with a proposal for reconciliation. This gave Franklin his opening. He immediately wrote Vergennes saying that he was being approached by the British. Vergennes wrote back a short letter saying, in effect, "The British do well because they divide and rule. So we two of us should stick together." Which gave Franklin the opening he needed when, after rejecting the first British proposal, he told Vergennes that when Wentworth would return, it would probably be with a better one; Vergennes of course knew that already, because the French

had a lot of spies in Britain. As a result, Vergennes decided to beat out the British counteroffer and agreed to a treaty with the United States that would entail recognition of the U.S. and that bound them together for the duration of the war upon a pledge not to make a separate peace. This was Franklin's extremely important achievement, which opened the gates of the French arsenals and French support and which eventually that June also led to war between Britain and France, more or less on the timetable that the French naval building estimates had proposed. So the French in going to war on behalf of the American republic saw a way not only to defeat the British and deny them the fruits of 1763, but perhaps also alter the balance of power altogether in Europe.

The miscalculation on everyone's part was that the entry of the French into the war would conclude the war quickly. Had the American Revolutionary War ended in two years, or two and a half years, it would have been accounted a very great thing, a model of the wisdom of French statecraft and Franklin's maneuvering and of General Washington's delaying tactics. But it did not end. Instead, it went on and on until 1781, upsetting everyone's calculations. In this long war, Franklin had to do what I mentioned earlier and to keep doing it, year after year, in the hope that eventually there would be some break on the battlefield.

He did get a change of colleagues. Dean was recalled on charges of profiteering, part of which was true but which was expected. Franklin's tormenter, Lee, hung on, and Dean was replaced by John Adams. Now, Adams and Franklin were like oil and water, or perhaps fire and water. They were temperamentally opposed to each other, politically opposed to each other, and they did not get along. Franklin wrote Jefferson at a later time describing Adams as "always an honest man, often a wise one, but sometimes absolutely out of his senses." Adams described Franklin as full of jealousy, envy, and servility to the French.

Adams has left us a precious account of Franklin's working day as only somebody like Adams could write, which gives a fair description of how Adams did not comprehend what Franklin was doing and how Franklin didn't care whether or not Adams comprehended.

*I found out that the business of our commission would never be done unless I did it.... The life of Dr. Franklin was a scene of continual dissipation. I could never obtain the favour of his company in the morning before breakfast, which would have been the most convenient time.... It was late when he breakfasted, and as soon as breakfast was over, a crowd of carriages came to his levee ... with all sorts of people, some philosophers, academicians, and economists ... But by far the greater part were women and children, come to have the honour to see the great Franklin, and to have the pleasure of telling stories about his simplicity, his bald head, his scattering straight hairs, among their acquaintances.*

*He was invited to dine abroad every day, and never declined unless we had invited company to dine with us. I was always invited with him until I found it necessary to send apologies, that I might have some time to study the French language and do the business of the mission. Mr. Franklin kept a horn book*

*always in his pocket in which he minuted all his invitations to dinner, and Mr. Lee said it was the only thing in which he was punctual.... Mr. Lee came daily to my apartment to attend to business, but we could rarely obtain the company of Dr. Franklin for a few minutes, and often when I had drawn the papers and had them fairly copied for signature, and Mr. Lee and I had signed them, I was frequently obliged to wait several days before I could obtain the signature of Dr. Franklin to them.*

*[In the afternoon] he went to his invitation to his dinner and after that went sometimes to a play, sometimes the philosophers, but most commonly to visit those ladies who were complaisant enough to depart from the custom of France so far as to procure sets of tea gear and make tea for him. Some of these I have known as Mme Hellvetius [sic], Mme Brillon, Mme Chaumont, Mme LeRoy, etc., and others whom I never knew and never inquired for. After tea the evening was spent in hearing the ladies sing and play upon their pianofortes and other instruments of music, and various games as cards, chess, backgammon, etc. Mr. Franklin I believe never played at anything but chess or checkers. In these agreeable and important occupations and amusements, the afternoon and evening was spent, and he came home at all hours from 9 to 12 o'clock at night.<sup>1</sup>*

Thus, according to Adams, Franklin did hardly any work at all but entertained himself ceaselessly. What is clear from other accounts is that Franklin was among the hardest working of men that most of his French acquaintances had ever met, although, mind you, most of the people he met never did a day's work in their lives. Nonetheless, he was extraordinarily hard working (so testified the physician Pierre-Georges Cabanis).<sup>2</sup> He had just concluded that it was best to do his work with Mr. Adams not around. And so Adams never did see him do any work. Franklin finally prevailed upon the congress to recall Adams, for which Adams never forgave him, as well as eventually Lee, because they were interfering seriously with his business. And in this task he elicited the help of Foreign Minister Vergennes, who announced that he was not going to see Mr. Adams again under any circumstances, because he found him too unpleasant and difficult to deal with. That's of course the equivalent of what is today the persona non grata.

The second major achievement was to reach a peace agreement with the British. Congress laid out a requirement that it be reached while respecting the French alliance, as the 1778 treaty insisted. As it turned out, the other commissioners who had to deal with this—Adams, John Jay, Jefferson, etc.—had all pretty much concluded that they should go into a separate peace, partly because they wanted the boundaries of the new United States of America to reach to the Mississippi River, which the French didn't want, partly because Vergennes had spent so much money on this war that the French had to come out of it with something more than simply the independence of the United States of America, grievous and hurtful as that was to the British. To make this story short, the Americans betrayed the French before the French could betray the Americans. When Vergennes said that he would permit separate negotiations so long as they were all signed on the same day and did not conflict with one another, license was given for the two sides to play.

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<sup>1</sup> Lopez, *Mon Cher Papa*, pp. 7-9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

When the Americans reached their agreement first, of course, Vergennes was incensed. He wrote to Franklin "I am rather at a loss, sir, to explain your conduct." Franklin replied, in one of the most ingenious pieces that he ever wrote, "Let not the project be ruined by a single indiscretion of ours," and reminded Vergennes almost as Vergennes had reminded him so many years earlier that only the British benefited from an open quarrel. Which led Vergennes to instruct the French representative in the United States, the Count of Luzerne, not to press the Congress for a vote of censure against the commissioners for having violated the treaty. Instead, Luzerne wrote in lines that are still worth quoting, "Great powers never complain, but they felt and remembered." This is something that has probably afflicted Franco-American relations ever since, and it bothered some Americans, too. When the American Expeditionary Army came to France in 1917, it was preceded by proclamations from American public figures that the U.S. had come to redeem the French contribution to American independence, which had never been properly requited because of the way the final treaty was reached. So the memory weighed on more than simply the French side.

At the end of this occasion, in 1783, Franklin wanted to go home. But somehow the Congress would not recall him until 1785. And when he did return, he feared that he would be a stranger in his own country, as he put it. Indeed, in some respects he was. He was 79 years old. He hardly knew anyone. The people he had gotten out of his hair, Lee and Adams, so as not to impede his mission in France, had spent a lot of time impugning his reputation in America. So while he came back to rapturous applause from the common citizen, among his peers he was still regarded with a good deal of suspicion. And then there were the expenses and the claims that had run up, none of which were ever satisfied by the American Congress, partly because they would not ratify Franklin's books, which, to give the Congress its due, were missing accounts for about a third of the money raised.

Franklin returned in time to achieve immortality by participating in the Constitutional Convention, he was 81 at the time, and he did participate in Pennsylvania politics, dying in 1790.

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Let me turn now to the lessons that we may take from this saga that ought to be, if they are not already, American traditions. I want to distinguish four.

The first is clarity of purpose. When you examine the record of Franklin and his contemporaries, at least those among the founding fathers who thought of things in a strategic way, as biographer Stacy Schiff has noted, Washington wanted to win the revolution without French soldiers or sailors. Adams wanted to win the revolution without a French treaty. Franklin wanted to win. He felt that if independence could be achieved, the U.S. would shortly free itself of those burdens. In the end, his clarity of purpose prevailed over the other two. Because without the French treaty and the French assistance, it could not have been done.

So there you have the importance of clarity of purpose. When you get into these things, you really have to know exactly what you want and to have thought it through and stick with it.

The second has to do with the relationship between war and diplomacy. The story of Franklin illustrates that diplomacy cannot redeem military defeat. Without Saratoga in the first instance, there would have been no treaty. Without Yorktown in the second, there would have been no peace. But diplomacy can convert military victory into political gain. The military victory at Saratoga was converted by Franklin into the alliance and the victory at Yorktown was converted by Franklin and others into the Treaty of Paris that ended the war and confirmed American independence.

Third, in diplomatic technique, there is a difference between a waltz and a march. The real problem Franklin had with Adams was that Adams was a geometrician when it came to foreign policy: There's the king, we need something from him, let's just march up and tell him what we need and why he should give it to us! Franklin understood that you would never get there if you tried that kind of direct approach. Instead, you had to adopt the technique of the waltz, and wander around the floor, sometimes in the opposite direction, in order finally to get to the center of things. That's still I think a very important technique. But depending on the society you are in, you have to be able to advance your diplomacy the way that society is prepared to accommodate it, not simply to march up and issue your demands and expect to be taken care of.

Fourth and finally, there is the importance of the gifted amateur. Franklin was very gifted, not such an amateur, he had a lot of experience as an agent in England, but he certainly had no formal training. Maybe another way of putting this is that foreign policy is too important to be left to the foreign service, which is the equivalent of saying that war is too important to be left to the generals. Franklin was a democrat. He believed that a person could raise himself up by his own efforts. He retired at the age of 42 and devoted himself to public service. Whether that was out of desire for honor, which he freely admitted was a large part of it, or for some other reason, he believed very strongly in a society where there was room for talent, and if the talent happened to be related to you, that shouldn't stop you from hiring relatives, either. This was Franklin, the gifted amateur who always wanted a society and a public service that was open to gifted amateurs.

I wish I could say that these diplomatic habits of Franklin's have become American traditions, but I'm afraid I have to say that every generation forgets them and has to rediscover them, sometimes at our country's peril. I would also have to say that the newly independent U.S.A. did not recognize Franklin's diplomatic contributions. He never got a penny for his efforts, he never got a syllable of thanks. He was unable to get his grandson placed in the U.S. diplomatic service, and indeed almost every request he made was tabled with great dignity and then ignored, even when he brought himself to write petitions in which he had to explain the great things that he had done for the public service. When he died on March 17, 1790, the French National Assembly then meeting

was so taken by the event that they proclaimed three days of mourning and sent a large number of eulogies to Philadelphia, then the capital of the United States. When this packet was brought to President Washington, he said "It is a communication from one legislature to another," did not open it, and sent it to the Senate and the House. The House passed a resolution that there should be a period of mourning; the Senate, under the control of the Lees and Adamses, refused. They also refused to open the package and sent it back to the president, who finally sent it to Secretary of State Jefferson, who opened it and then sent the open contents to the Senate and to the House. It was John Adams who read the eulogy in the Senate, and by all accounts it was a very lackluster tone of voice that he used.

In Philadelphia, therefore, the major eulogy for a man who had had 20,000 attend his funeral was delivered by the vice president of the Philosophical Society that Franklin had founded. By a close vote between the two vice presidents, the men selected the Rev. Mr. Smith, a long-time enemy of Franklin's on theological and other grounds, to deliver the eulogy, which by all accounts was damnation by faint praise.

Nonetheless, two days before Franklin died, John Adams wrote a prophetic passage, which galled him to write but which nonetheless has turned out to be the case. He said he was disgusted by the lie already going around about the Revolution. "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 politics, negotiations, legislatures, and war."



PORTRAIT OF FRANKLIN, BY PHILIPPE AMEDEE VANLOO:  
COURTESY OF AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY, PHILADELPHIA  
COMMISSIONED BY MADAME HELVETIUS

So if you look at one of Franklin's favorite paintings, that was commissioned by Mme Helvetius, wearing the bifocals that he had invented in France, and you see that face, you know that this is a man who knows that he's going to have the last laugh. And so it was that from that time until this, when we think of the American Revolution, even though we're not at all acquainted with the marvelous things that Franklin did in France, nonetheless what springs to mind among the founding fathers are the names Washington and Franklin. What Adams said, of course, the story that was going around about the role of the two, was not entirely true. But then again, it was not entirely a lie. This was Dr. Franklin's favorite intellectual territory.