BENJAMIN FRANKLIN AND THE TRADITIONS OF AMERICAN DIPLOMACY

By Harvey Sicherman

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Benjamin Franklin’s diplomatic achievements are centered around three items: first the 1778 alliance with France, which was essential for the military and diplomatic success of the American War of Independence; second, the 1783 peace treaty, which confirmed American Independence. In between came his third achievement, raising 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 of many billions in today’s 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. 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? Franklin arrived in Paris on December 21, 1776, accompanied by two boys: one, his grandson, William Temple Franklin, 16 years old, the illegitimate son of his illegitimate son; and the other Benjamin Franklin (Benny) Bache, the 7-year-old son of his daughter Sally. For a man of 70 to be accompanied by two boys of that age gives some indication that this was going to be a very unusual voyage.

When Franklin arrived at the behest of the American committee on secret correspondence, he had a few things going for him. First, he was the best known American in the world. He had been honored by Louis XV for his scientific attainments and of course he also had a considerable reputation as a journalist, his fortune having originated from printing. He was independently wealthy and did not need to be paid for anything.

His second big advantage is that he hated the British. He had had been an ardent British imperialist and an agent in London before being humiliated by the Privy Council, after which he developed a hatred of the British that was shared by the French. 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, but was suspected of somehow not being quite American.
Another problem was that he was not the only commissioner who had been dispatched to get help from the French. There were Silas Dean, who was involved in contracting and buying things, and Arthur Lee, who was antagonistic toward anyone who tried to work with him. These were the two commissioners who saddled Franklin when he arrived in France.

Another telling problem was that he was 70 years old. Washington was 43, Thomas Jefferson was 32, and John Adams was 38. So Franklin was a very senior fellow who had begun to suffer physical difficulties such as the gout and a kidney stone.

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, and in any event had an insuperable difficulty in mastering it in that he did not speak French well. So 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 a considerable hazard.

There was one more 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. 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 of exactly what he did, down to the last paper, and complained often to the commissioners that he had so much writing to do that 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 promptly transferred to the British ambassador, Lord Stormont.

To make matters worse, 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.

What was Franklin's task? He had an instruction from the committee “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 one of the best diplomats in Europe, and in effect say to this man “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 demonstrated that Washington was many things, but a competent general he was not. The attempt to take Canada had also failed. So 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? 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. He portrayed himself the way the court and the people of France wanted to see him.

The ancien regime, where people tried to outdo each other in luxury, was in its last stages. King Louis was only 23 years old, Marie Antoinette was barely 20, they had no idea of how much anything cost. And yet Franklin arrived 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, fitting the French notion that the Americans were some kind of a new race, purged of all the dross and the excesses of the Old World.

So Franklin took it upon himself to appear as if he were some sort of backwoods sage. Now, of course, he had no experience of the countryside. He was a very cosmopolitan fellow, and the idea of posing as a simpleton was for him a thespian challenge. Nonetheless, he was willing to carry this pose to extreme instances. When he was presented to the king, instead of wearing an expensive uniform, bemedaled and draped with silver and gold, he wore a plain brown suit and carried his hat under his arm. This proved exceedingly popular with everyone.

Franklin was a great fixture at salon society, spending a lot of time at two houses in particular, those of the Brillons and of Madame Helvetius. 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. 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.

There was the issue of money and trying to raise it and spend it. Part of this was also facilitating the movement of volunteers. These volunteers drove him mad. There was an endless supply of French officers who hadn't fought in years wanting to do something, presenting themselves and 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 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 stimulated the French to pay attention to him, so that the American cause became popular in very many aspects of French society. These ten months that Franklin managed to keep the American cause alive were finally redeemed at the Battle of Saratoga in October 1777, when British General Burgoyne was forced to surrender with his entire army, which had foolishly marched down from Canada. Franklin was vindicated and became the toast of the town.

In November, the British secret service agent Wentworth approached him with a proposal for reconciliation. Franklin 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 returned, 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 or two and a half years, it would have been accounted a great thing, a model of the wisdom of French statecraft and Franklin's maneuvering and Washington's delaying tactics. But instead it went on until 1781, upsetting everyone's calculations. In this long war, Franklin had to keep doing what he had year after year, hoping that eventually there would be some break on the battlefield.

He did get a change of colleagues. Dean was recalled on charges of profiteering. Lee hung on, and Dean was replaced by John Adams. Now, Adams and Franklin were like oil and water. Franklin wrote Jefferson later 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.

According to Adams, Franklin did hardly any work at all but entertained himself ceaselessly. In fact, from other
accounts it is clear that Franklin was among the hardest working men that most of his French acquaintances had ever met. He had simply concluded that it was best to do his work with Mr. Adams not around. 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.

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 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, and 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 U.S. independence, grievous and hurtful as that was to the British. In 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.

When the Americans reached their agreement first, Vergennes was incensed. He wrote to Franklin “I am rather at a loss, sir, to explain your conduct.” Franklin replied, “Let not the project be ruined by a single indiscretion of ours,” and reminded Vergennes 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 for a vote of censure against the commissioners for violating the treaty. Instead, Luzerne wrote, “Great powers never complain, but they felt and remembered.”

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. Indeed, in some respects he was. He was 79 years old. He hardly knew anyone. Lee and Adams 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 financial records, which did not account for about a third of the money raised.

Franklin returned in time to achieve immortality by participating in the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Still a participant in national and Pennsylvania politics, he died in 1790, aged 84.

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, 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, and 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. 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. Franklin’s story illustrates that diplomacy cannot redeem military defeat. Without Saratoga, there would have been no treaty. Without Yorktown, there would have been no peace. But diplomacy can convert military victory into political gain. Franklin converted the military victory at Saratoga into the alliance, and he and others converted the victory at Yorktown 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! Franklin understood that you would never get there that way. Instead, you had to waltz, to wander around the floor, sometimes in the opposite direction, in order finally to get to the center of things. That’s still a very important technique. 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.
Fourth, there is the importance of the gifted amateur. Franklin was very gifted, but he had no formal training. Perhaps foreign policy is too important to be left to the foreign service, as 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. He believed very strongly in a society where there was room for talent.

Unfortunately, every generation forgets these diplomatic habits of Franklin’s and has to rediscover them, sometimes at our country's peril. Nor did the newly independent U.S.A. recognize Franklin’s diplomatic contributions. He never got a penny for his efforts or a syllable of thanks. When he died on March 17, 1790, the French National Assembly 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 did not open it but 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.

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.

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.