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# BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

AND THE CRISIS OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

WALTER A. McDOUGALL







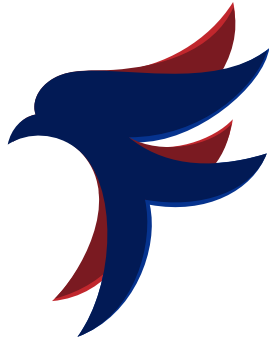
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COVER: Benjamin Franklin (Adobe Stock)



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# BENJAMIN FRANKLIN AND THE CRISIS OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

This essay is based on the Second Annual Ginsburg-Satell Lecture on American Character and Identity delivered on June 5, 2019, hosted and co-sponsored by the Museum of the American Revolution.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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After service in the U.S. Army artillery during the Vietnam War, McDougall took a PhD under world historian William H. McNeill at the University of Chicago (1974). The following year he was hired by the University of California, Berkeley, and taught there until 1988, when he was offered the chair at Penn.

His articles and columns have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Commentary*, and other national publications. An unabashed generalist, his books range from *France's Rhineland Diplomacy 1914-1924: The Last Bid for a Balance of Power in Europe* (1978), and *...the Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age* (1985), to *Let the Sea Make a Noise: A History of the North Pacific From Magellan to MacArthur* (1992), *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (1997), *Freedom Just Around the Corner: A New American History 1585-1828* (2004), and *Throes of Democracy: The American Civil War Era 1829-1877* (2008), which was chosen by the Athenaeum of Philadelphia as best book of the year by a local author.

His latest book is *The Tragedy of U.S. Foreign Policy: How American Civil Religion Betrayed the National Interest* (Yale University Press, 2016).

**The First Annual Ginsburg-Satell Lecture "Where Did the Founders Get Their Ideas?" is available on [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org).**



On a raw afternoon in December 1773 two men met in London's Kensington gardens for the purpose of killing each other.

John Temple, who had served as a customs official in New England, had little experience with weapons. William Whately, a banker, had none at all. But they fell upon each other without even waiting for their seconds to arrive. After both pistol shots went awry they thrashed at each other with swords for forty-five minutes in what an historian calls "a clumsy, almost comical affair."<sup>1</sup> When the banker suffered a serious wound spectators finally separated the duelists. In fact, the two men barely knew each other, although both had ties to prominent people in Massachusetts and both had obtained access to a sheaf of confidential letters sent to Whately's now deceased brother by the colony's governor, Thomas Hutchinson. Eight years before, during the agitation over the Stamp Act passed by Parliament, a Boston mob had sacked and burned the governor's elegant town house. So Hutchinson, himself a native of Massachusetts, had written those letters urging that British officials "abridge what are called English liberties" lest his angry provincials issue "a veritable declaration of independence."<sup>2</sup> Somehow the inflammatory missives surfaced in Boston in June 1773 and their publication provoked more riots plus a petition from the assembly calling for Hutchinson's recall. Who had leaked the letters? For months suspicion in London had fallen on Whately or Temple, which caused each to accuse the other of lying, which prompted the near-fatal duel.

That smoked out the real perpetrator. On December 25, 1773, a shocking letter appeared in the London Advertiser signed by a third party



*The Boston mob that ransacked and burned Hutchinson's house in the agitation following the Stamp Act.*

who confessed to leaking the correspondence: none other than the Deputy Postmaster for North America, Benjamin Franklin. A London resident since 1757, he served as the colonial agent for Massachusetts as well as Pennsylvania, and his motive had been to show the colony's leaders that one of their own – not the king or Parliament – had been responsible for the fact that their town was now occupied by Redcoats. In other words, Franklin had meant to promote reconciliation. Instead, he was obliged to write the speaker of the Massachusetts assembly Thomas Cushing: "I am told by some that it was imprudent to avow obtaining and sending those letters, for that the administration will resent it, but if it happens I must take the consequences."<sup>3</sup>

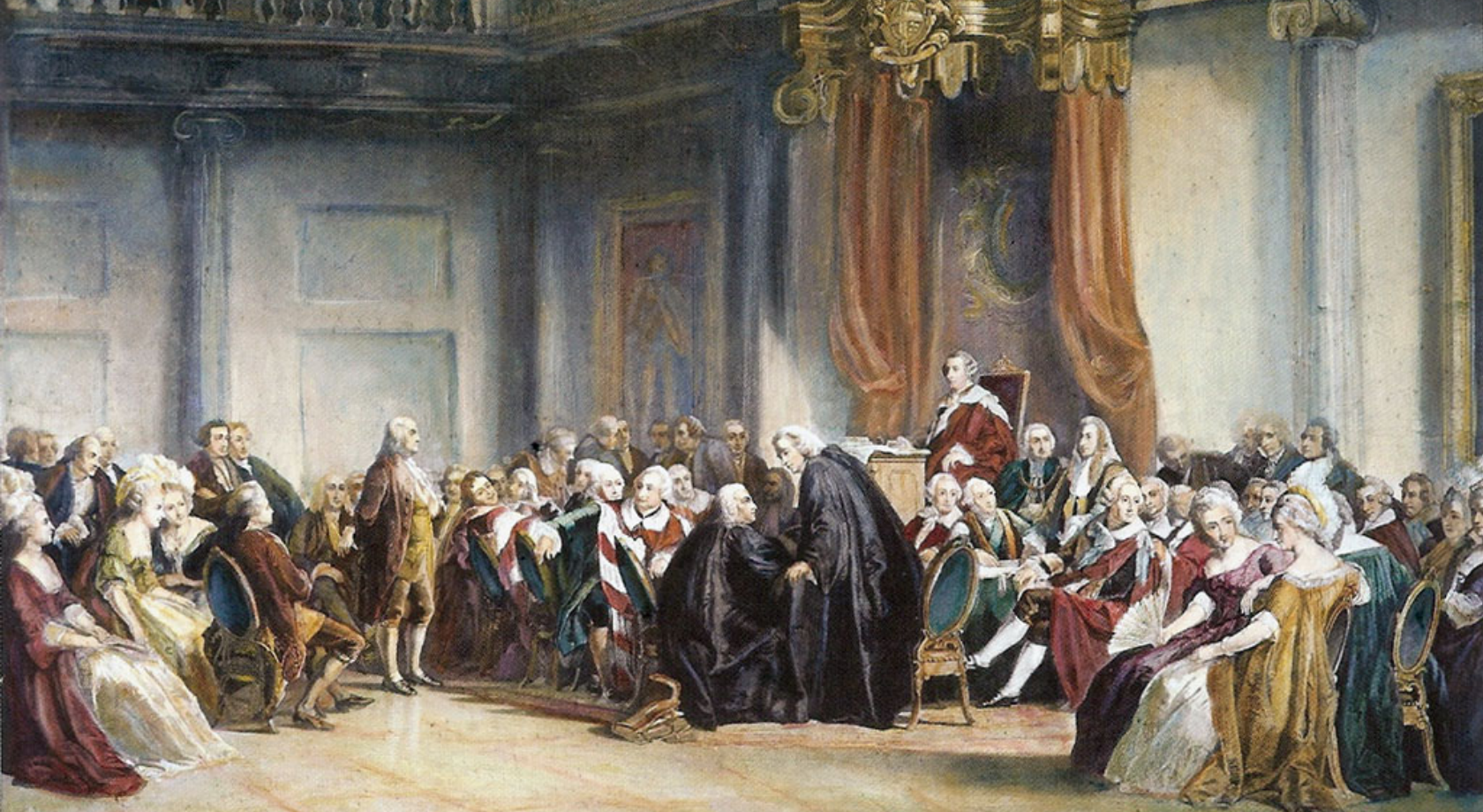
The consequences were not slow to arrive. On the evening of December 16, 1773, after a contest of wills between Bostonians and their royal officials over the payment of duties on tea, a mob boarded three East India Company ships

<sup>1</sup> Penegar, *Political Trial*, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Wood, *Americanization*, p. 141.

<sup>3</sup> Penegar, *Political Trial*, p. 59. In an afterword (pp. 171-86), Penegar examines the people who might have pilfered copies of the Hutchinson letters and delivered them into Franklin's possession in December 1772. Since Franklin himself never revealed his source the person or persons remain unknown to this day. Of the half-dozen persons variously nominated my own favorite was Franklin's old rival turned protégé, Hugh Williamson. A medical doctor trained at the College of Philadelphia, he went on to become a surgeon-general in the Continental Army and a heroic delegate to the Continental Convention. After his death in 1819 his eulogist David Hosack claimed Williamson purloined the letters and made copies for Franklin. But Penegar agrees with Bailyn's judgment in *Ordeal*, pp. 235-36, that the most likely leaker was Thomas Pownall, a former governor of Massachusetts and Member of Parliament who shared Franklin's hopes for reconciliation between Britain and the colonies, and whose brother served in the Colonial department under Lord Hillsborough. Thus, Pownall had the motive, means, and opportunity. See also Franklin Papers XIX: 409-11.





*Franklin was summoned to the "Cockpit" where the king's Privy Council held its meetings and was obliged to stand, speechless, for an hour while Solicitor General Alexander Wedderburn dressed him down on behalf of Hutchinson, Prime Minister Lord North, King George III, the British Empire, "and the very name of decency."*

and dumped 342 chests of tea into the harbor. On January 7, 1774, Whately filed suit against Franklin for purloining the Hutchinson letters. Two days later Franklin presented the petition from the Massachusetts assembly demanding Hutchinson's recall. On January 27 news of the Boston Tea Party struck London like lightning. And on January 29 Franklin was summoned to the Privy Council where he was subjected to a vicious and carefully planned humiliation in the so-called Cockpit.

More than thirty peers, including the Chief Justice and Archbishop of Canterbury were in rapt attendance. The spectator benches overflowed with dignitaries, very few of whom had any sympathy for the scheming American.

Historian Daniel Mark Epstein describes the scene: "At the head of the table, his figure inclined like a question mark or a scythe, rises

the dark figure of the solicitor general, Alexander Wedderburn, a lawyer famed for eloquence and malice. A short, delicate, hawk-nosed man, Wedderburn pointed his finger at Franklin and pounded the table. He had come on behalf of Governor Hutchinson, Lord North, the King, the Empire, and the very principle of decency – to call Benjamin Franklin to account." Franklin, who later likened it to a bull-baiting, stood rigid and still for over an hour while the solicitor leveled vicious indictments. He accused him of inciting insurrection and of inspiring pamphlets which told Bostonians "of a hundred rights of they had not heard before, and a hundred grievances they had not felt."<sup>4</sup> He accused him of leaking the Hutchinson letters for the purpose of undermining the governor's stoic efforts to calm his constituents. Finally, he verged on accusing Franklin of treason by suggesting he had become possessed by the idea of a Great American Republic. The Privy Council, almost as an

<sup>4</sup> Epstein, *Loyal Son*, pp. 174-76; Goodwin, *Franklin in London*, pp. 247-50; Isaacson, *Franklin*, pp. 276-78; Penegar, *Political Trial*, pp. 75-91.



afterthought, then dismissed the Massachusetts petition out of hand.<sup>5</sup>

Franklin walked home alone, seething inside, and carefully packed away the elegant velvet suit he had donned for the occasion, swearing never to wear it again until he was somehow avenged. Two days later he learned that he had been stripped of the Postmaster's office he had filled for two decades, at which point he also resigned his position as agent for Massachusetts.

Most historians since have assumed that Wedderburn's arrogant calumnies suffice to explain Franklin's conversion to the American cause. In fact, they did not. The story is much more complicated than that.

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Last year's Ginsburg-Satell lecture traced the American Founders' ideas all the way back to the Classical and Hebrew republicanism bequeathed by the Renaissance city-states of 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy and the Cromwellian Commonwealth of 17<sup>th</sup> century England. This year we shall stick closer to home – much closer – for the subject is Benjamin Franklin and the crisis of the British Empire.

The first thing to realize about 1776 is that the declaration of independence was by no means inevitable. As historian J. C. D. Clark writes at the start of his essay, "What If There Had Been No American Revolution?": "History labours under a major handicap in societies suffused with a sense of their own righteousness or inevitability. Whether driven by secular ideologies, shared religious beliefs or consensual optimism, such societies devise intellectual strategies to blot out their earlier sense of the paths that were not taken ... <despite> their attractiveness to those who, knowingly or unknowingly ... made the fatal choices."<sup>6</sup>

Americans, steeped in their powerful civil religion



Niccolo Machiavelli

which takes for granted their righteous nation's inevitability, have trouble imagining "paths not taken." And Exhibit A is Benjamin Franklin, whose zealous advocacy for British imperial unity persisted to the bitter end. Yet, as early as the 1820s Americans were honoring Franklin, on a par with George Washington, as a Father of His Country and archetype of the national character.

Over the two centuries since his reputation has only grown. Historian Robert Spiller considered Franklin's life the "distinctive American story" because he was both pragmatic and idealistic, scientist and salesman, speculator and philanthropist. Gladys Meyer called him the embodiment of American liberalism because of his support for "free trade, self-government, liberty, equality, education, social mobility, freedom of speech, press, thought, and religion." William Dean Howells considered him the "most modern, most American" man of his time.<sup>7</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner named him "the first great American."<sup>8</sup> And so on down to H.W. Brands, whose biography published in 2000 named Franklin "the first – in the sense of foremost – American"; Walter Isaacson whose 2003

<sup>5</sup> Brown, *Most Dangerous Man*, p. 245, wrote: "There has never, in my knowledge, except for the "McCarthy hearings, been so public a disgrace of a good man more magnificently received and taken than when Franklin, nearly seventy, stood silent."

<sup>6</sup> Clarke, "British America" in Ferguson, *Virtual History*, p. 125.

<sup>7</sup> Sanford, *Franklin and the American Character*, seriatim.

<sup>8</sup> Wood, *Americanization*, p 3.



*Statues of Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia*

biography called Franklin the first American; and Stacy Schiff whose 2005 biography claimed he was an American even before it was possible to be one. In my own 2004 book I cited Franklin's penchant for hustling in both the positive and pejorative senses as a quintessential American trait. Most recently, David Brooks, the prominent New York Times columnist, has dubbed Ben "Our Founding Yuppie," and Elon Musk tersely remarked, "Franklin was pretty awesome."<sup>9</sup>

Now, an audience of Philadelphians needs hardly be told about Franklin's character and lifetime achievements as a printer, entrepreneur, and civic leader who helped to found his adopted city's first fire department, police patrol, masonic lodge, library, college, militia, and post office. Nor of his homespun humor and biting satire, nor his fame as a self-taught scientist and philosopher, nor of his taming of electricity and ingenious inventions.

Indeed, it seems only natural that Americans came quickly to identify themselves with a man displaying so great a range of talents, achievements, and evident virtues. But what does one make, then, of this judgment by Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Gordon Wood? While granting that Franklin quickly became a sort of national symbol, Wood insisted that "the

historic Franklin of the eighteenth century was never destined to be that symbol. He was not even destined to be an American!"<sup>10</sup>

That is the story I mean to tell you tonight. And the story begins, not with Franklin's birth in Boston in 1706, or flight to Philadelphia in 1723, or founding of the Pennsylvania Gazette in 1729, or publication of Poor Richard's Almanac beginning in 1733, or any of his civic or scientific achievements.

The story begins in 1754 when Colonel George Washington of the Virginia militia led an expedition into the forests of western Pennsylvania in hopes of prying the French out of their recently founded Fort Duquesne where the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela forms the Ohio River. Instead, Washington blundered into a battle that escalated into the climactic French and Indian War. Franklin, by now 48 and comfortably retired from business, jumped into politics. On the local scale he became active in Pennsylvania's faction opposing the proprietor Thomas Penn. On a grander scale he had recently become postmaster for all the northern colonies. On the grandest scale, Franklin now championed Britain's geopolitical struggle for all North America.

<sup>9</sup> Brooks, "Our Founding Yuppie," review of Brands' biography (Oct. 23, 2000):<https://www.weeklystandard.com/david-brooks/our-founding-yuppie>  
<sup>5</sup> Ways a Biography of Ben Franklin Shaped Elon Musk's World View:

<https://www.cnn.com/2017/04/19/5-things-we-can-learn-from-one-of-elon-musks-favorite-books.html>

<sup>10</sup> Wood, *Americanization*, p. x.



Pennsylvanians had long been vexed by problems of self-defense since Quakers were pacifist and their assembly was strapped for revenue since the Penn family's vast estates were tax-exempt. Franklin took matters into his own hands by raising a militia paid for by lotteries, procuring horses, wagons, and supplies for General Edward Braddock's (disastrous) 1755 offensive toward Fort Duquesne, and by representing his colony at the Albany Congress on the Hudson River. Sponsored by the British Board of Trade, its immediate purpose was to entice the Six Nations Iroquois into a war alliance, but delegates also took the occasion to advance plans for a colonial alliance. One of them, coincidentally, was proposed by the young Thomas Hutchinson.

Franklin later recorded in his autobiography that many objections and difficulties were voiced but at length his own plan was unanimously adopted. It left imperial strategy and defense in the hands of the Crown and envisioned appointment of an American President-General by the King, but it would also create a Grand Council of colonial delegates empowered to tax.

His plan was dead on arrival because, Franklin wrote, the assemblies "were narrowly provincial in outlook, mutually jealous, and suspicious of any central taxing authority." Moreover, "the assemblies did not adopt it, as they all thought there was too much prerogative in it, and in England it was judg'd to have too much of the democratic."<sup>11</sup> He later rued that because under his plan the colonies would have been strong enough to defend themselves without English troops, which in turn were the subsequent pretense for taxing the colonists.

The war began badly for the Redcoats and colonial militias, whom the British were now beginning to call – with a tinge of contempt – "Americans." But Anglo-colonial relations improved markedly over the course of the war thanks to the wise policies

of Prime Minister William Pitt, who, among other things, reimbursed colonial assemblies for their military expenses. In 1759 and '60 British regulars captured Quebec and Montreal, the French tried in vain to retake them, and then ceded all Nouvelle France to Great Britain in the 1763 Peace of Paris. Franklin exulted. The colonists, he wrote, were fortunate to live "under the best of kings ... <and> happy in the vigor and wisdom of the administration...."<sup>12</sup>

Charles Pratt and William Burke, both prominent English lawyers, were among the few who did not exult. They feared that removal of the French threat to the thirteen colonies would perversely tempt them to pursue independence. But Franklin dismissed such fears, assuring the British such notions would never enter the colonists' heads.

\* \* \* \* \*

By that time Franklin had become a more or less permanent expatriate, comfortably residing at Mrs. Stevenson's boarding house near Charing Cross in London. In 1757 Pennsylvanians had made him their colonial agent charged with lobbying the Privy Council to rescind the Penn proprietorship and appoint a royal governor. In that he would fail, but in all other ways Ben flourished in the cosmopolitan capital thirty times the size of Philadelphia.. His 28-year-old son flourished even more. William Franklin, the illegitimate offspring of an unknown affair, had accompanied Ben to London in order to study law. William rose so quickly in aristocratic circles that in 1761 he was invited to attend the coronation of George III. The following year he married the daughter of a Barbados sugar planter and the year after that Prime Minister Lord Bute arranged for his appointment as governor of New Jersey. Not surprisingly William became a devoted royalist, so much so that he later became the most prominent "Tory" during the American Revolution.<sup>13</sup> But that lay thirteen years in the

<sup>11</sup> Franklin, *Autobiography*, pp. 102-3.

<sup>12</sup> William Anthony Hay, "These States, United" (June 11, 2018): *Claremont Review of Books Digital*: <https://www.claremont.org/crb/basicpage/these-states-united/>

<sup>13</sup> See Epstein, *The Loyal Son*, for a recent, complete, and beautifully written account of the "war in Franklin's house." When Benjamin finally decided to sail home, join the Continental Success, and then sign the Declaration of Independence a year later, he opened a breach with his son that never would heal. William Franklin not only refused to join the American cause, he tried to use his prerogatives and prestige as Governor of New



the empire's future because it obliged all parties to ask a question few had posed, and none had answered, before. What was the British Empire, anyway?

Twelve of the thirteen colonies – all but Georgia – had been founded during the seventeenth century under charters granted by Stuart kings. The last of them, James II, took a personal interest in America because, as Duke of York, he had dispatched the expedition that conquered New Amsterdam. When he then assumed the throne in 1685 James planned to merge all the colonies into dominions modeled on the Spanish vice-royalties. Happily for the colonists the English Whig Party ousted King James in the Glorious Revolution of 1688, established Parliamentary Supremacy and the Bill of Rights, and pretty much left the colonies to their own devices for fully 75 years.<sup>15</sup> Such Salutary Neglect suited the colonists, whose assemblies became largely self-governing, and suited the Whig establishment who exploited – at no expense to themselves – coastal plantations that served as sources of commodities and burgeoning markets for British manufactures.

So by 1763 Americans just took for granted that they were autonomous subjects of a king whose authority was checked by a Parliament whose own authority did not extend beyond the British Isles. Few realized that over those same 75 years the British had lived through events that impressed on crown and Parliament alike the chilling potential for civil unrest. Between 1689 and 1759 no less than fifteen Jacobite conspiracies to restore the Stuart pretenders – four of which included plans for foreign invasions – had posed existential political threats to the Whig establishment, whereas social disorders in England became so endemic that in 1769 Franklin observed: “I have seen, within a year, riots in the country, about corn; riots about elections; riots about workhouses; riots of

future. For the time being Ben was proud and even a bit envious of his over-achieving son.

In any event, Ben was also warmly received in British society. St. Andrews and Oxford universities bestowed honorary degrees on the scientist, the Royal Society welcomed him, and such luminaries as David Hume, Adam Smith, and Joseph Priestley befriended him. Ben, always alert to the main chance, also promoted a company hoping to get a royal charter for a new colony on the Ohio River. (The directors called it “Vandalia” after the presumed Mediterranean ancestry – her complexion was dusky – of George III’s otherwise German queen, Charlotte von Mecklenburg-Strelitz.) In all things Franklin’s identity, interests, and ambitions were so intimately bound up with Britain that he wishfully projected his loyalties on to his countrymen, saying they would never unite against a nation “with which they have so many connections and ties of blood, interest, and affection.”<sup>14</sup>

Reality soon suggested otherwise. For the climax of the Anglo-French struggle for North America served as prelude to an intramural conflict over

Jersey to organize the Loyalist resistance. Colonial militias deposed him in January 1776 and later condemned him to solitary confinement in a cruel prison. He was released in a prisoner exchange in 1778 and moved to New York City, then under British occupation, where he established an active network of Loyalist partisans and spies. In 1782 he went into exile in England and never saw his father again save for a brief and cold meeting in London in 1785.

14 Franklin, “The Interest of Great Britain Considered,” in *Papers of Franklin* 9: 90.

15 McDougall, *Freedom Just Around the Corner*, pp. 94-98.



colliers; riots of weavers; riots of coal-bearers; riots of sawyers; riots of Wilkesites; riots of government chairmen; riots of smugglers in which customs officers and excisemen have been murdered and the King's vessels and troops fired at."<sup>16</sup> So Parliament had become vigilant about threats to law and order, not least on the fringes of empire.

British notions of sovereignty had also hardened considerably in ways that escaped the colonists. The first volume of William Blackstone's commentaries on English Common Law, published in 1766, argued that sovereignty rests with the Crown-in-Parliament and "sovereignty admits of no degrees, but is always supreme <so> to level it is in effect to destroy it." Blackstone called John Locke's popular right to resist putative tyranny "a doctrine productive of anarchy," in all but the most extreme circumstances.<sup>17</sup> (Incidentally, that same principle would be later invoked by Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln when they equated nullification and secession with anarchy.)

Moreover, it is often forgotten that the British Empire after 1763 consisted almost entirely of the North American colonies and the Caribbean sugar islands dependent on them for food and commerce. So we needn't wonder why Crown and Parliament believed they must stand firm on sovereignty lest their whole empire dissolve.

Next, very few British or colonists anticipated the burdens that came with their victory over the French. For instance, all the Native Americans now became the King's subjects and must be protected and/or policed on a violent western frontier. An omen of what might ensue was Pontiac's Rebellion, a violent war in defense of ancestral tribal lands. The native insurgency was suppressed, but the generals estimated some 10,000 Redcoats might be needed to garrison forts at a cost of £300,000 per year. It was in hope of appeasing the Indians that George III declared the Proclamation Line of 1763, forbidding new



pioneer settlements west of the Appalachians including the Ohio Valley over which the Anglo-French war had broken out in the first place.

Then there were all the Quebecois, whom New Englanders had hated and feared for 140 years. They, too, were now the King's subjects and must be appeased. So Parliament began to talk openly about establishing the Catholic Church and expanding Quebec southward to the Ohio River, again nullifying the western claims of some of the colonies.

Finally, the British Treasury had nearly doubled the national debt over the course of the war from £75 million to £133 million until interest payments now consumed more than half the annual budget. Parliament expected Americans, supposedly the chief beneficiaries of the

<sup>16</sup> Smith, ed., *Writings of Franklin*, 10: 239.

<sup>17</sup> Hay, "An End to Empire," in Moots and Hamilton, *Justifying Revolution*, p. 265.



of the otherwise admirable British government, especially the petty factionalism that inevitably corrupts one-party rule.

After three generations of uncontested rule, the Whig political establishment was bereft of ideas. Its factions had become mere matters of personality, patronage, and pelf in the form of lobbies such as the Sugar Interest, the Tea Interest, the Merchant Interest, and the Landed Interest, or Squirearchy. William Pitt had vision, but his health began to fail in 1762. Young Edmund Burke also had vision, but as yet little influence. Otherwise, Parliament was rent by feckless coalitions, while the prime ministry fell in a dizzy succession from Bute to Grenville, Rockingham, Pitt, Grafton, and finally Lord North. Their policies toward the colonies were inconsistent, if not incoherent.

war, to share that fiscal burden, stop dodging the Navigation Acts through their habitual smuggling, and help to pay for the soldiers and officials stationed among them.

Yet those seemingly prudent efforts to meet Britain's new responsibilities outraged a critical mass of colonists because it seemed to them the British were violating all four historic spirits of English expansion.

The first was the hustling spirit of rural and commercial capitalism; second was the crusading spirit of the Protestant Reformation; third the imperial spirit in rivalry with the Catholic colonial powers; and fourth, the civilizing spirit which John Locke claimed had given the English a right of eminent domain over the lands of indigent people such as the Irish and Native Americans. The colonists had been weaned on those spirits and so felt betrayed when the British had evidently become heretics in their own church!<sup>18</sup>

Those were the external sources of imperial crisis. Let us turn now to the internal debilities

Yet another handicap faced by British authorities was the lack of a colonial ministry, a consequence of their never having faced an imperial crisis. The British army and Royal Navy were under separate commands, the military as a whole was independent of the Board of Trade, which in turn shared authority over economic policy with the Customs Board and the Treasury. The only body which occasionally deliberated strategy for the empire was the Privy Council's sub-committee on Plantations. Thomas Pownall, who had served as Governor of Massachusetts and whose brother was on the Board of Trade, was infuriated by such confusion. In 1764 he published *The Administration of the Colonies*, a critique of British governance and a cry for imperial unity along the lines of the Albany Congress.<sup>19</sup> Four years later Parliament got around to creating a Secretary of State for the Colonies. But since the other agencies clung jealously to their influence, the colonial ministers had little authority.

<sup>18</sup> McDougall, *Freedom Just Around the Corner*, pp. 17-37, describes the origins of the four spirits at length.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas, *Stamp Act Crisis*, pp. 21-33



The timing of this imperial crisis was also unfortunate because it occurred during the final decades of mercantilist economic ascendancy. Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, which introduced the theories of free market economics, appeared coincidentally in 1776. But several decades would pass before its ideas caught on, and in the meantime British mercantile interests were determined to enforce their monopolies and suppress the de facto "free trade" that Americans practiced through their relentless smuggling.

Edmund Burke later told Parliament, "The Americans have made a discovery, or think they have made one, that we mean to oppress them; we have made a discovery, or think we have made one, that they intend to rise in rebellion against us ... we know not how to advance; they know not how to retreat.... Some party must give way."<sup>20</sup> In fact, all the elements of the imperial crisis I have just described suggest that there were no conspiracies on either side – merely ignorance and incompetence.

\* \* \* \* \*

Franklin had little grasp of the formidable barriers to a wise and conciliatory colonial policy. And because some British leaders such as Pitt, Burke, and radical Parliamentarians Isaac Barré and Charles Wilkes, sometimes spoke in favor of conciliation Franklin wrongly believed America had "friends" in high places.<sup>21</sup> The truth was – however much the British elites quarreled over details – they all took for granted that the sovereign right to tax and regulate resided in Parliament.

Something Franklin did understand well – having written about it as early as 1751 – was demographics. He predicted the populations of the American colonies would double every twenty five years, such that within a century "the

greatest Number of Englishmen will be on this Side of the Water.... What an Accession of Power to the British Empire! What Increase of Trade and Navigation!"<sup>22</sup> His numbers should have set off alarm bells in his head, but instead persuaded him that the prophecy of Bishop George Berkeley was coming true. In 1728 Berkeley had written of Britain's imperial destiny – "Westward the course of empire takes its way" – in his epic poem on *Planting Arts and Learning in America*.

In 1763 Franklin returned briefly to Philadelphia but was back in London the following year to lobby against the proprietor Thomas Penn and for his Vandalia Company. He arrived just as Parliament began to adjust to Britain's new imperial responsibilities, including provision of a civil administration and military defense of the frontier. Now under Salutary Neglect the colonists had been able to tame the few royal officials in their midst and they never saw Redcoats in peacetime. But the Grenville ministry, aiming to standardize administration and raise revenue to cover the new imperial expenses, sponsored the 1764 Currency Act and 1765 Stamp Act. The former prohibited circulation of foreign coins and colonial scrip in favor of British currency, and the latter obliged Americans to conduct all their transactions from legal documents, contracts, licenses, bills of sale, land grants, wills, even playing cards on stamped paper which colonists must purchase with their scarce British currency. For good measure, the Quartering Act also obliged Americans to garrison any soldiers deployed in their midst.

Franklin had not protested these measures. On the contrary, he positively recommended the Stamp Act, perhaps imagining that he himself, as postmaster and prominent printer, might profit as a dispenser of patronage.

It soon became apparent how badly he had

<sup>20</sup> Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, pp. 158-59.

<sup>21</sup> When, for instance, a government supporter alleged Parliament's right to tax the colonies because they had been nurtured like children by their mother country, Barré boldly objected: "We did not plant the colonies. Most of them fled from oppression. They met with great difficulty and hardship, but as they fled from tyranny here they could not dread danger there. They flourished not by our care but by our neglect. They have increased while we did not attend to them. They shrink under our hand" (Thomas, *Stamp Act Crisis*, p. 93).

<sup>22</sup> Franklin, "Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind," in Ormond Seavey, ed., *Autobiography and Other Writings*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 251-252.



*In several colonial towns irate people rioted and hanged stamp officials in effigy*

miscalculated. American colonists finally did unite, but in disharmony, not harmony, with the British. A Stamp Tax Congress convened to petition Parliament for repeal. Sons of Liberty tarred and feathered British officials. That Boston mob burned Governor Hutchinson's mansion. Congress also declared a boycott of British goods, which cost merchants £2 million per year and made them perform the only "friends of America" in Parliament insofar as they lobbied for repeal of the Stamp Act.

So Franklin, supposedly the colonies' principal spokesman, made a U-turn in his February 1766 testimony before Parliament. The Rockingham Whigs, who had toppled the Grenville Whigs, were looking for a way out of the fracas and Franklin obligingly patronized them by speaking persuasively for over two hours.

He assured the house the colonists' temper toward Britain had never been better than in 1763. But since then their temper had turned ugly due to Parliament's restraints on their trade, prohibition of foreign coinage and colonial paper money, and the heavy tax on stamps. Indeed, he explained, the consequences of any attempt to tax the colonists directly would lead to a total loss of respect and an embargo on British exports. Indeed, the most delicious passage in the 17 pages of testimony was this final exchange. Question: "Would it be more for the interest of Great-Britain, to employ the hands of Virginia in tobacco, or in manufactures?" Franklin: "In tobacco, to be sure." Question: "What used to be the pride of the Americans?" Franklin: "To indulge in the fashions and manufactures of Great-Britain." Question: "What now is their pride?" Franklin: "To wear their old clothes over again, till they themselves can make new ones."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Simmons and Thomas, *Proceedings and Debates*, vol. 2, pp. 235-51 (quote, p. 251).



Following this testimony he agonized in a letter to a Scottish friend: "I have lived so great a Part of my Life in Britain, and have formed so many friendships in it, that I love it and wish its Prosperity, and therefore wish to see the Union on which alone I think it can be secur'd and establish'd. As to America, the Advantages of such a Union are not so apparent." Indeed, "Every Act of Oppression will sour their Tempers, greatly lessen if not annihilate the Profits of your Commerce with them, and hasten their final Revolt: For the Seeds of Liberty are universally sown there, and nothing can eradicate them. And yet, there remains among the People so much Respect, Veneration and Affection for Britain, that, if cultivated prudently ... they might be easily govern'd still for Ages, without Force or considerable Expense."

So Parliament repealed the Stamp Act, but was careful to pair that with passage of the 1766 Declaratory Act which reserved to Parliament "full power and authority to make laws and statutes of sufficient force and validity to bind the colonies and people of America ... in all cases whatsoever." Two months later William Pitt, now the Earl of Chatham, became prime minister. It was he who created the Colonial Office and chose Lord Hillsborough its chief. Franklin reported enthusiastically to Joseph Galloway, speaker of the Pennsylvania assembly: "We have the satisfaction to find that none of those whom we looked on as adversaries of America in the late struggles, are come to power...."<sup>24</sup> Alas, that was another misunderstanding. For even though Chatham had favored repeal of the Stamp Act, he still meant to enforce the Quartering Act, which New York was defying, and to raise revenue in the colonies by imposing duties on their imported goods. Franklin had misled him into believing Americans would not protest "indirect or external taxation."

That false assumption gave Charles Townshend, Pitt's Chancellor of the Exchequer, his head. No British officials were more determined than

the brothers Charles and George Townshend to impose uniform imperial rule in accordance with the late 18<sup>th</sup> century European trend called Enlightened Absolutism. George had chosen a military career. In 1745-46 he helped the Duke of Cumberland's army defeat the Jacobites, after which he imposed his ruthless regime on the Highland Scots. He later performed similar duties in Quebec and in Ireland. Charles had chosen a political career. Upon being named Chancellor in 1767 he authored the plan for what came to be known as the Townshend Duties to be enforced by British customs houses. Moreover, the revenues gleaned from these tariffs would cover the costs of imperial administration and thus eliminate the power of the purse hitherto wielded by colonial assemblies. In the words of historian Will Hay, "Where the Stamp Act had been a specific revenue measure, the Townshend duties were part of a systematic effort to bring the colonies to heel."<sup>25</sup>

Franklin hoped for the best, especially when Charles Townshend died of a mysterious fever in September 1767. He also spent most of the following year attending to his private business. But it turned out the Chatham ministry let him down there as well. In August 1768 Lord Hillsborough finally replied to Pennsylvania's petition about revoking Penn's charter, and his answer was no. He also issued a ruling about the Vandalia Company, and again the answer was no since it would clearly violate the king's Proclamation Line. Franklin was crushed, but nevertheless informed Galloway that he thought it wise to stay on until it became clearer what turns American affairs were likely to take. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Franklin was in denial about sentiments in London and the colonies alike even as his own influence was evaporating rapidly.

So, too, was that of the colonial assemblies, whose relentless petitions against acts of Parliament were frankly becoming a bore. Most were addressed to the Privy Council in hopes the king would take up the colonies' cause. That

<sup>24</sup> *Papers of Franklin* 13: 384.

<sup>25</sup> Hay, "These States, United," p. 6.

infuriated most Whigs, who styled themselves keepers of the flame regarding the Parliamentary Supremacy won through the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

Meanwhile Parliament pressed on with the Townshend agenda by passing the Commissioners of Customs Act of 1767, which created a Customs Board with headquarters in Boston and branches in other American ports. Since the Board was charged with rigorous enforcement of the Navigation Acts and the duties, it inevitably provoked public disorder which in turn caused General Thomas Gage, the commander in North America, to ask that two regiments be stationed in Boston. When they arrived by sea in October 1768, the city fell under an ominous cloud.

Yet another cabinet change occurred that same month because Chatham, once again ailing, stepped down in favor of the Duke of Grafton. He inherited the wind blown up by the Townshend Duties when it turned out colonists resisted indirect taxation as vehemently as direct taxation. By spring 1769 hundreds of merchants in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston declared another boycott of British goods, and the Virginia assembly renewed its Non-Importation Resolution. So the Grafton cabinet, under pressure from the Merchant and Sugar Interests, reluctantly asked Parliament to repeal the duties with the sole exception of tea.

\* \* \* \* \*

As if the British government hadn't enough to copewith, comic confusion ensued at this juncture thanks to one of the most outlandish scoundrels in British political history. John Wilkes, the son of a gin distiller, had become notorious as a rabble-rousing, self-promoting populist. In 1763 he had published an article in the *North Briton Review*, Number 45, which savagely critiqued the king's speech at the opening of Parliament. Wilkes was also notorious for being an avid patron of

the lewd and blasphemous Hellfire Club which Sir Francis Dashwood hosted at his rural retreat, Medmenham Abbey. (Incidentally, the only American known to have visited Medmenham was Benjamin Franklin because Dashwood, Britain's Postmaster-General, was his direct superior.)<sup>26</sup>

In 1764 Wilkes made the mistake of playing a practical joke on another Hellfire Club member, John Montagu, the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Sandwich, who wasn't amused. He avenged himself by arranging for Parliament to declare Wilkes an outlaw whereupon George III eagerly issued a warrant for his arrest. Wilkes fled to France, but ran up so much debt there that he decided to take his chances back in England where he soon rallied sufficient support to win an election to Parliament. The outraged House of Commons promptly expelled him whereupon Wilkes won the Middlesex by-election from his prison cell. By 1769 he had become a national obsession and defiant symbol of radicalism and reform, and his popularity continued to crest until he became Mayor of London in 1774. Moreover, Wilkes gave vocal support to American colonists, whose oppression he likened to that of his own mobs crying the slogan, "Wilkes, Liberty, and Number 45!" His popularity raised more false hopes among Americans, some of whom were inspired to found a town in 1769 named after two radical Brits: Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

The Middlesex embarrassment obliged the Grafton ministry to resign in January 1770.<sup>27</sup> George III, having run through six prime ministers in eight years, decided to gamble on a new name who quickly displayed such deft administrative and political skills that his ministry lasted twelve years. Unfortunately, Lord North's longevity derived from his determination to carry out the will of Parliament and the Crown with regard to the naughty colonists.

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26 Goodwin, *Franklin in London*, pp. 234-35, doubts Franklin engaged in any debauches while visiting Medmenham. He and Dashwood, after all, were getting on in years, and Ben's own account (in a letter to his son) mentions only silly mischief such as abridging the Anglican Book of Common Prayer.

27 Thomas, *Townshend Duties*, pp. 98-114. The editor of the Parliamentary papers on North America and leading historian of the British origins of the revolution, concludes: "The contribution of John Wilkes to the loss of the American colonies can be held to embrace the sabotage of Grafton's colonial policy as well as the apparent example of the British government's threat to liberty that his cause represented in many American eyes. There was a twofold link between John Wilkes and the coming the American Revolution" (p. 114).



\* \* \* \* \*

That sole duty which Parliament had chosen to retain sharply reduced the retail price of tea because its real purpose was not to raise revenue. It was to allow the East India Company to undercut the prices charged by foreign tea smugglers and thus defend the company's monopoly. But that still made colonial merchants and consumers dyspeptic. Massachusetts lawyer Daniel Leonard explained, "Will not posterity be amazed when they are told that the present distraction took its rise from parliament's taking a shilling off the duty on a pound of tea, and replacing it with three pence?" Bostonians reasoned that if Parliament claimed the right to impose a monopoly on tea, what monopoly might it not impose?<sup>28</sup> So what Americans were really rebelling against was mercantilism and what they were really defending was a smuggler's racket. It had nothing to do with taxation without representation, which no one took seriously on either side of the ocean.

As tensions rose the Redcoats in Boston became an ever more menacing presence until the inevitable bloodshed occurred in March 1770. New Englanders retaliated for the Boston Massacre in various ways, most famously by looting and burning a British revenue cutter that ran aground in Rhode Island. The clash between parents and children was finally beginning to clarify. If British customs officials guarded by soldiers succeeded in getting their way, colonial merchants would lose lucrative trade while Americans as a whole would become "slaves" to the British plutocrats who monopolized commerce and Parliament. That is why the governor of New York informed the Colonial Office that "even if the tea comes free of duty I understand it is to be considered as a monopoly ... of dangerous tendency ... to American liberties."<sup>29</sup> That is why John Hancock, the richest merchant in Boston, made common cause with Sam Adams, the penurious rabble-rouser.

Franklin, desperate to reverse this dangerous



*The Boston Massacre*

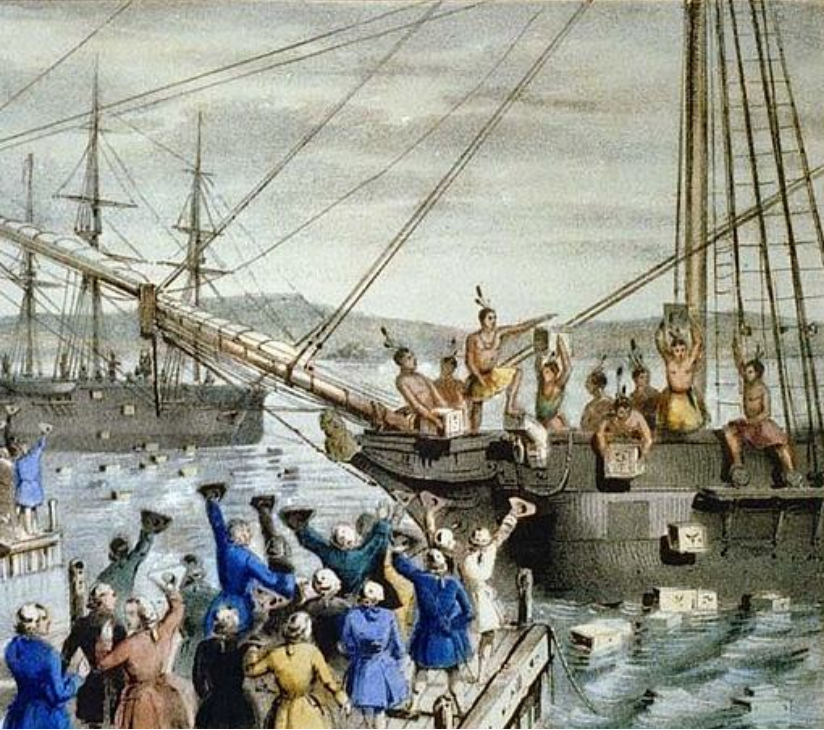
drift, resorted to satire. All told, he published some 90 comedic items in England under 42 pseudonyms. But the two major ones written in 1773 were barely veiled warnings and not very funny. In "An Edict by the King of Prussia" he asked readers to imagine how Britons would react if Frederick the Great made demands on them similar to those they made on the colonies. And in "Rules By Which a Great Empire Might Be Reduced to a Small One" he sarcastically instructed the British government that if its purpose was to shed its colonies then it was proceeding in just the right fashion.

Nobody paid attention. In retrospect it was clear that Franklin's cachet was dissolving. Only Wilkes's street people now had any sympathy for the American cause. The King and Parliament held it in contempt, while British merchants, having twice lobbied for repeals, were in bad odor.

Even the colonial agencies ceased to be factors because the tiresome Franklin now represented New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Georgia as well

<sup>28</sup> Clark, "British America" in Ferguson, *Virtual History*, p. 142. Governor William Tryon of New York tried to explain to Lord Dartmouth, the colonial minister, that even "if the tea comes free of duty, I understand it is then considered to be a monopoly dangerous tendency, it is said, to American liberties.... So that, let the tea appear free or not free of duty, those who carry on the illicit trade will raise objections": Thomas, *Townshend Duties*, pp. 256-57.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas, *Townshend Duties Crisis*, pp. 256-57.



*The Boston Tea Party*

as Pennsylvania, whereas Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina did not have any representation at all.<sup>30</sup> Such were the circumstances that likely persuaded Franklin he must somehow buy time, which meant he must cool colonial tempers, which meant he must risk sending the Hutchinson letters to Boston.

That was the worst of his blunders. Publication of the letters only rekindled the rage in Boston's taverns, and when the first East India Company ships dropped anchor in December 1773, hotheads staged the Boston Tea Party, dumping £10,000 worth of tea chests into the harbor in what was a premeditated, theatrical act of defiance ... indeed, of sedition, which Franklin's machinations had apparently inspired.

In April 1774 Lord North introduced bills to close Boston's port, revoke the colony's

charter, suspend Massachusetts law, and oblige colonists to house Redcoats in their homes. "The Americans," he told Parliament, "have tarred and feathered your subjects, plundered your merchants, burnt your ships, denied all obedience to your laws and authority; yet so clement and forbearing has our conduct been that it is incumbent on us now to take a different course. Whatever may be the consequences, we must risk something; if we do not, all is over."<sup>31</sup>

Those Coercive Acts, or Intolerable Acts as they were called in America, forged a resolve among a critical mass of colonists such that their assemblies called for a Continental Congress. William Franklin, as the royalist governor of New Jersey, urged the crown to preempt that by convening its own congress to include the governors, representatives of the assemblies, and "British gentlemen of abilities, moderation and candour commissioned by His Majesty." But the king ignored the suggestion while Parliament inflamed the American colonists further by passing the Quebec Act that June.

Had Benjamin Franklin turned Patriot after Wedderburn's vicious humiliation of him in the Cockpit? He had not.<sup>32</sup> In fact, he even offered to pay out of his pocket the cost of the tea lost in Boston Harbor and wrote Speaker Cushing that "an union of the friends of liberty in both Houses will compel a change of that administration and those measures."<sup>33</sup> But it did not. He imagined the opposition might be victorious in the 1774 Parliamentary elections. But it was not. He imagined another embargo of British trade might oblige a repeal. But this time it would not. And when Congress sent Franklin its Address to the

<sup>30</sup> New York's colonial agent remained the formidable Edmund Burke albeit his influence in Parliament was undermined by New York's assembly which was defying the Militia Act as well as all restrictions on commerce. It was at this juncture that he pronounced his famous interpretation of the constitutional empire (Thomas, *Tea Party*, p. 75). "The Parliament of Great Britain sits at the head of her extensive empire in two capacities: one as the local legislators of this island, providing for all things at home, immediately, and by no other instrument than the executive power. The other, and I think the nobler capacity, is what I call her *imperial character*, in which, as from the throne of heaven, she superintends all the several inferior legislatures, and guides and controls them all, without annihilating any.... I think subordination and liberty may be sufficiently reconciled through the whole."

<sup>31</sup> William Cobbett et al., eds., *The Parliamentary History of England: From the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*, 36 vols. (New York: Johnson Reprint, 1966), 17:1280–1281.

<sup>32</sup> Wright, *Franklin of Philadelphia*, p. 228, explains why it did not despite the humiliation. "The attack on him was foolish, for many of his ties and interests strengthened his natural caution: his crown office <postmaster>, his son's governorship, his wish to replace the <Penn> Proprietors by a royal government, his hope for a vast land grant in the West, all made him, and might have kept him, loyal. The arrogance of Wedderburn in 1774 was in some respects an index of national arrogance."

<sup>33</sup> *Franklin Papers* XXI: 306.





*The First Continental Congress*

Crown in December, he imagined that could change the King's mind. But it could not. King George, deeming the Continental Congress illegitimate, refused to read it.<sup>34</sup>

No one miscalculated more thoroughly or more often than Franklin, in part because no one tried harder to heal the rift in the empire. In fact, some Britons and Americans alike now suspected Franklin of playing a double game all along. He was too American for the British and too British for the Americans. One could well imagine the old man – he was now 68 and suffering from gout and a form of malaria – giving up and going home if he could summon the strength to do so. (Franklin had written to William two years before that he feared his health would prevent another sea voyage and even foresaw his imminent death, which “cannot be far distant.”)<sup>35</sup>

Yet even now Franklin was encouraged anew by confidential visits from several conciliatory MP's and by the surprise appearance in London of Josiah Quincy, Jr. As a member of Sam Adams'

inner circle, the Bostonian's evident mission was to discern whether Franklin could be trusted and to explore possibilities for eleventh hour back-channel negotiations. The 31-year-old Quincy fell entirely under the spell of Ben's “sagacity, judgment, morality, and benevolence. I was charmed.” He returned home in expectation of providing a “singular service” and preventing “much calamity and producing much good to Boston ... <and> all America.” Whether that expectation was justified can never be known because Quincy caught tuberculosis on his return voyage, grew too ill to write anything down, and died just hours before his ship docked at Gloucester.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, the climax of Franklin's desperate discussions with his few remaining “friends” in Parliament occurred on January 29, 1775, when the Earl of Chatham's elegant carriage pulled up in broad daylight at Franklin's house. Chatham had drafted several bills which he discussed with Ben at length and introduced to the House of Lords three days later. They stipulated

<sup>34</sup> The King's refusal expressed a point of principle, but also pragmatic strategy. This or that colony might exist on the North American continent, but “the colonies” did not, especially when acting in unison and therefore negotiating from strength. (As Franklin said, they must all hang together or surely they will all hang separately.)

<sup>35</sup> Epstein, *Loyal Son*, p. 153.

<sup>36</sup> Goodwin, *Franklin in London*, pp. 264-65.

Parliament's supremacy and right to station troops in America, but repealed the Intolerable Acts and recognized the Continental Congress, in exchange for which the colonies would pledge to raise revenue for the crown.<sup>37</sup>

Had William Pitt presented those terms to Parliament back in 1765 the plan might have gained traction. Even now, the initial reception was positive and Dartmouth, the Colonial Secretary, appeared to approve. At that point the villainous Earl of Sandwich stood up to denounce the plan which, he intoned, "could not have been composed by an English peer" and must have been authored – he stood staring at Franklin in the gallery above – "by an American, indeed by one of the most mischievous enemies this country has ever known!"<sup>38</sup> The bills were defeated 32 in favor and 68 opposed. A week later Parliament and the Crown declared Massachusetts to be in a state of rebellion.

The only hope for reconciliation now was that the Rockingham Whigs, who hitherto had not taken a stand, might sway the House of Commons. So Edmund Burke, their most eloquent orator, delivered a spell-binding three-hour speech to a packed House of Commons on the 22nd of March. Citing the size and growth of the colonies' population, agriculture, shipping, forestry, manufactures, and commerce, he concluded the conflict could never be settled by force simply because Britain could never suppress them for long. But even more salient than statistics, he explained, was the character of the Americans.

Those people are Englishmen, sir, born with a free spirit. What is more, they are Englishmen in whom religion is neither worn out nor impaired.... Those people are Protestants, sir, and of that kind, which is most

adverse to submission.... The Northern colonies profess various denominations, but commune in the same spirit of liberty. As for the Southerners, their spirit of liberty is still more high and haughty. That is because they are slave-holders, sir, and where this is the case in any part of the world, those who are free are by far the most proud and jealous.... What is more, no people on earth has made so general a study of law than the Americans, a study which renders men acute, inquisitive, dexterous, prompt in attack, ready in defence, and full of resources.... But even if the colonists were less numerous, less loving of liberty, less steeped in religion, less proud, they would still be irrepressible for the simple reason that Americans are full of chicane and take whatever they want. In any event, an Englishman is the least fit person on earth to argue another Englishman into slavery.<sup>39</sup>

Burke's motions to repeal the Intolerable Acts and withdraw the Redcoats were defeated by a vote of 78 in favor and 270 opposed. Less than a month later the shooting began at Lexington and Concord.

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Thus did the peripatetic, befuddled British elites, having backed down several times, finally decide to call the colonists' bluff. As British historian Peter Thomas aptly concludes: "The <American> War of Independence was not a heroic enterprise, but the result of political miscalculation."<sup>40</sup> Franklin's fourteen-year mission for imperial unity had come to a ruinous end. The British

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37 A few months earlier Franklin had visited Chatham to fawn over the "truly great man" and regale him with the grandest of imperial visions. If the United Kingdom and American colonies hanged together, the British Empire might expand across North America to the South Seas just then being explored by Captain James Cook! All that was needed was for Parliament to honor the colonists' constitutional rights: Black, *Crisis of Empire*, p. 115.

38 Letter to Charles Thomson (Feb. 5, 1775): *Papers of Franklin* 21: 579-81.

39 This pastiche conveys the tone, content, and rhetoric of Burke's long address, the full text of which appears in Simmons and Thomas, *Proceedings and Debates* 5: 594-631.

40 Thomas, *Tea Party*, p. 175.





crown issued a warrant for his arrest and it was still making its way through the courts on March 20, 1775, when he boarded the Philadelphia packet at Portsmouth and sailed for home. But not before spending a last melancholy day with Joseph Priestley, who wrote in his diary that while they read newspaper accounts of the likelihood of an American war, Benjamin grew more and more emotional until he could no longer read through the tears in his eyes.<sup>41</sup>

Franklin arrived in Philadelphia on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May and was elected a Pennsylvania delegate to the Second Continental Congress the very next day. But he still clung to a forlorn hope that George III might step forth as a *deus ex machina*, appease the colonists, and save imperial unity.

Hence his final act as a loyal British subject was to help John Dickinson draft the Olive Branch Petition of July 1775. And when the King again would not deign to read it, there kindled in

Franklin's heart a seething hatred for George III he carried with him to the grave.<sup>42</sup> Like Washington before him, Franklin became a reluctant republican because the British themselves had thwarted his grand imperial vision, and like Washington he went on to do more than any other Founder to secure the independence of the United States.<sup>43</sup>

As the new nation's first diplomat he sailed back to Europe and negotiated the military alliance with France that turned the tide in the war. It was on the day that treaty was signed at Versailles in February 1778 that Ben again donned the velvet suit he had sworn not to wear until he was avenged for his ordeal in the Cockpit.

That same month Lord North belatedly offered to send a peace commission to America and seek a truce based on Parliament's waiver of rights to tax or legislate for the colonies, the withdrawal of all British soldiers, and no modification of


41 Epstein, *Loyal Son*, pp. 202-3. "There is no other record of Franklin's ever weeping," reports Epstein. I certainly cannot think of one.

42 John Adams later recalled that Franklin expressed a "personal animosity and very severe resentment" toward the king. As late as 1773 he had faith that George III would prevent the Westminster Parliament from ever revoking colonial charters or suborning the rights of the assemblies. So he took it personally when the king refused even to read the Olive Branch Petition and sided with Parliament. What is more, George came to hate Franklin in return, so much so that when a lightning strike caused an explosion at a royal ordnance depot in England and a Royal Society investigation found the fault in a metal cramp inside the structure, the king refused to believe that Franklin had not sabotaged the arsenal by providing it with a defective lightning rod! See Goodwin, *Franklin in London*, pp. 270-71.

43 This strong comparison is made by Morgan, *Franklin*, pp. 252-53. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially the ante-bellum decades, American primers and schoolbooks such as the McGuffey Readers, habitually paired Washington and Franklin as the twin founders of the republic, whereas all the other Founding Fathers revered in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were treated as minor or ignored altogether.

charters without the colonists' assent.<sup>44</sup> Imagine that he had made that offer four years before. What might the consequences have been?

First, no War of Independence, of course. Second, no radical French Revolution because participation in the American war was what bankrupted Louis XVI and forced him to call the Estates General in 1789. Third, no War of 1812 because the British Empire remained united. Fourth, possibly no American civil war because the British Parliament abolished slavery – with compensation for slave-owners – in 1833, and an American Parliament would presumably have had the same authority. One might even imagine no Great War in 1914 because Imperial Germany would never have dared challenge a British empire that included, as integral dominions, nearly all North America. And if no Great War, perhaps no Communism, Fascism, World War II, or Cold War.

Doubtless other calamities would have befallen the nations over the past two hundred years. History happens. But those which did occur might never have done so, if Benjamin Franklin's dreams had come true. Yet in retrospect even he came to conclude – if only by way of self-exculpation – that the British imperial crisis had been Providential. In 1787 he confessed to the delegates of the Constitutional Convention, "The longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth – that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his assistance?"<sup>45</sup> 

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<sup>44</sup> Hay, "An End to Empire," in Moots and Hamilton, *Justifying Revolution*, pp. 277-78.

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/benfranklin.htm>



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