



- Multidisciplinary life: scientist, inventor, diplomat, writer, business strategist, practical political thinker
- But the most interesting thing that Franklin invented, and continually reinvented, was himself.
- Franklin's most important vision: an American identity based on the virtues and values of its middle class.
  - How does one live a life that is useful, virtuous, worthy, moral and spiritually meaningful?
  - Questions are just as vital for a self-satisfied age as they were for a revolutionary one.
- Early American settlers were pursuing both religious freedom AND economic opportunity.

- "Industry and frugality are the means of procuring wealth and thereby securing virtue." -BF
- Maxims from his almanacs:
  - "Fish and visitors stink in three days."
  - "Little strokes fell great oaks."
  - "Three may keep a secret if two of them are dead."
  - "Diligence is the mother of good luck."
  - "Love your enemies, for they will tell you your faults."
- Franklin excelled in writing, but failed math. Still became one of the most ingenious scientists of his era, but did not transcend into a profound theorist (i.e. Newton).
- "From a child I was fond of reading, and all the little money that came into my hands was ever laid out in books." -BF
  - \*Books most important formative influence in his life. He would sneak books from apprentices who worked for booksellers as long as he returned them clean. Was a vegetarian early in life so he could save more money for books.
- His writing lacked poetic flourish, but was powerful in its directness.
- His most notable trait was a personal magnetism; he attracted people who wanted to help him.
- American individualists sometimes boast of not worrying about what others think of them. Franklin, more typically nurtured his reputation, as a matter of both pride and utility.
  - \*An apostle of being, and appearing, studious.
- Lesson he learned early: people are more likely to admire your work if you're able to keep them from feeling jealous of you. Indulge their vanity (give them opportunities to demonstrate their abilities), they will praise you in turn.
- Franklin easily made friends and intellectual companions, but was less good at nurturing lasting bonds that involved deep personal commitments or emotional relationships, even within his own family.
- On deciding whether or not to take a customer's money and run a defamatory article that violated his principles:
  - Paused to make the decision, went home and slept on it.
  - Practiced voluntary hardship, slept on the floor, ate plainly.
  - Determined that he could live this way, was not worth corrupting his values for a more comfortable subsistence.
- Writing to discover: Franklin began to clarify his religious beliefs through a series of essays and letters.
- Moral Perfection Project:
  - Made a list of 13 virtues he aspired to master
  - Focused on improving one virtue each week (related it to weeding a garden, not all at once, but one bed at a time)
- First great American exemplar of the Enlightenment and its Age of Reason. Born in Europe in the late 17th century, defined by an emphasis on reason and observable experience, a distrust of religious orthodoxy and traditional authority, and an optimism about education and progress.
- "The general foible of mankind is in the pursuit of wealth to no end." BF
- Franklin's subscription library (The Library Company of Philadelphia), first of its type in America. Subscribers pay dues to borrow books. Improved the

intelligence of common tradesmen and farmers, as local subscription libraries caught on.

- His work focused on lightning and electricity led to his first becoming a popular hero.
  - Believed science should be pursued initially for pure fascination and curiosity, then practical uses would eventually flow.
- Self-made: Thirst for knowledge made him the best self-taught writer and scientist of his times.
- Pride for practical solutions:
  - Crossing the Atlantic in the summer of 1757, nearly wrecked on the Scilly Isles. "Were I a Roman Catholic, perhaps I should on this occasion vow to build a chapel to some saint. But as I am not, if I were to vow at all, it should be to build a lighthouse." BF
- Traveling: Franklin's summer travels were the source of great joy
  - Deborah didn't share his love for travel and curiosity for the world.
  - She was as independent in her own way as he was in his.
  - Spent 15 of the last 17 years of their marriage an ocean away.
  - Throughout his life, had few emotional bonds tying him to any one place, glided through the world the way he glided through relationships.
- Modern election campaigns are often criticized for being negative, and today's press is slammed for being scurrilous. But the most brutal of modern attack ads pale in comparison to the barrage of pamphlets in the 1764 Assembly election.
- The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin:
  - His goal was to describe how he rose from obscurity to prominence and to provide some useful hints about how he succeeded, for others to imitate.
  - If he found himself writing with too much pride about an event, he would revise it by adding a self-deprecating comment.
  - Autobiographies existed, but this was the first masterpiece by a self-made man.
- Second continental congress:
  - Franklin, nearing 70, was by far the oldest of the 62 participants
  - Many of the younger, hotter-tempered delegates had never witnessed Franklin's artifice of silence, his trick of seeming sage by saying nothing (oratory did not come naturally to him).
  - No one had a clue where he stood on the question of independence. He was biding his time to convert key figures close to him to the rebel cause.
- Distaste for established elites, arbitrary authority, nepotism:
  - Chafed at authority, why he ran away from his brother's print shop in Boston.
  - Was not awed by established elites – Mathers, Penns, peers in the house of lords.
  - Opposed unfair tax policies by Penns, even though they would have served his personal advantage.
  - Stressed in all his letters that America should not replicate rigid ruling hierarchies of Old World based on birth rather than merit, virtue, and hard work.
  - Groundless and absurd to honor a worthy person's descendants (should instead honor the person's parents since they had some role in it, like Chinese do).
  - Rose up social ladder, but did so in a way that resisted taking on elitist pretensions (fur-capped persona).

- At 70, he was continuing to embark on missions for Congress:
  - Cambridge, MA to help Washington with disciplining the militia that would form the nucleus of a true continental army.
  - Quebec to support American forces focused on preventing Britain from splitting colonies via Hudson River.
  - Showed his eagerness to be involved in practical details, rather than detached theorizing.
  - He was also, both as a teen and as an old man, revitalized by travel.
- Declaration of Independence:
  - Jefferson asked Franklin to help edit. Most important change was to Jefferson's phrase, "We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable" to "We hold these truths to be self-evident."
  - Changed this phrase from an assertion of religion to an assertion of rationality.
- Fate of the Revolution placed into Franklin's hands, just as much as those of Washington and others. He needed to secure support of France—its aid, its recognition, its navy. Displayed dexterity that would make him one of the greatest American diplomats.
  - He was instrumental in shaping the three great documents of the war: the Declaration of Independence, the alliance with France, and the treaty with England.
- "Moderate your desire of victory over your adversary, and be pleased with the one over yourself." BF
- The Constitutional Convention of 1787:
  - He was by far the most traveled of all the delegates, and knew not only the nations of Europe but the thirteens states (franchised printing operations, time as postmaster, etc.). More receptive to needs of each state and open to diversity of opinions.
- Sensibility, willingness to change mind, and humility to be open to different opinions:
  - On crafting the constitution, Franklin realized that they had succeeded not because they were self-assured, but because they were willing to concede that they might be fallible.
  - "We are making experiments in politics. We must not expect that a new government may be formed as a game of chess may be played, by a skillful hand, without a fault." BF
  - "For having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged, by better information or fuller consideration, to change opinions even on important subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be otherwise." BF
- Legacy:
  - During the three centuries since his birth, the changing assessments of Franklin have tended to reveal less about him than about the values of the people judging him. Reflect, or refract, the attitudes of each succeeding era.
  - His reputation was elevated by the emergence of distinctly American philosophy known as pragmatism - holds that truth of any proposition (whether scientific, moral, theological, or social) is based on how well it correlates with experimental results and produces a practical outcome.
  - Unfairly attacked over the years by romantics whose real targets were capitalism and middle-class morality.

- In most of the endeavors of his soul and mind, his greatness sprang more from his practicality than from profundity or poetry.
- His guiding principle was a "dislike of everything that tended to debase the spirit of the common people."