

Benjamin Franklin and American Diplomacy

Required Reading

From *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* by Walter Isaacson (2003)

The rough winter crossing aboard the *Reprisal*, though a fast thirty days “almost demolished me,” Franklin later recalled. The salt beef brought back his boils and rashes, the other food was too tough for his old teeth, and the small frigate pitched so violently that he barely slept. So, on sighting the coast of Brittany, an exhausted Franklin, unwilling to wait for wind to take him closer to Paris, had a fishing boat ferry him and his two bewildered grandchildren to the tiny village of Auray. Until he could get to Paris by coach, he wrote John Hancock, he would avoid taking “a public character” and try to keep a low profile, “thinking it prudent first to know whether the court is ready and willing to receive ministers publicly from the Congress.”

France was not a place, however, where the world’s most famous American would find, not truly seek anonymity. When his carriage reached Nantes, the city feted him at a hastily arranged grand ball, where Franklin reigned as a celebrity philosopher-statesman and Temple (his grandson) marveled at the height of the women’s ornately adorned coiffures. After seeing Franklin’s soft fur cap, the ladies of Nantes began wearing wigs that imitated it, a style that became known as the coiffure a la Franklin...

But convincing France to do more was not going to be easy. The nation was not financially strapped, ostensibly at peace with Britain, and understandably cautious about betting big on a country that, after Washington’s precipitous retreat from Long Island, looked like a loser. In addition, neither Louis XVI nor his ministers were instinctive champions of America’s desire, which might prove contagious, to cast off hereditary monarchs...

Within weeks, all fashionable Paris seemed to desire some display of benign countenance. Medallions were struck in various sizes, engravings and portraits were hung in homes, and his likeness graced snuffboxes and signet rings. “The numbers sold are incredible,” he wrote his daughter Sally. “These, with the pictures, busts and prints (of which copies upon copies are spread everywhere), have made your father’s face as well known as that of the moon.”



[Franklin in the fur cap he had sent over from America]

In England, Franklin had set up a cozy household with a surrogate family. In France, he quickly assembled not merely a household but a miniature court. It was situated, both figuratively and geographically, between the salons of Paris and the palace at Versailles, and it would grow to include not only the requisite new family but also a visiting cast of fellow commissioners, deputies, spies, intellectuals, courtiers, and flirtatious female admirers. The village of Passy, where Franklin reigned over this coterie, was a collection of villas and chateaux about three miles from the center of Paris on the edge of the Bois de Boulogne...his Passy compound became America's first foreign embassy...



[The village of Passy]

In the spring of 1776, just before Franklin's arrival, [Foreign Minister Comte de] Vergennes had composed for the king a set of proposals that argued in unvarnished terms what France's policy should be: "England is the natural enemy of France; and she is an avid enemy, ambitious, unjust, brimming with bad faith; the permanent and cherished object of her policy is the humiliation and ruin of France." America, he said, needed French support to prevail. It was in France's interest, economically and politically, to try to cripple England by embracing the new nation. He presented these proposals to Louis XVI and his cabinet—which included the Comptroller of Finances, Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, who was to become Franklin's friend and fan—in the gold-gilded Council Chamber of Versailles.

Turgot and the other ministers were worried about France's tight finances and lack of preparedness, so they urged caution. The king approved a compromise: France would lend some support to America, but only secretly. Vergennes's letters on the subject, it was decided, would be dictated to his 15-year-old-son, whose handwriting would not be identifiable if they fell into the wrong hands...As he would prove in France, Franklin not only knew how to play a calculated balance-of-power game like the best practitioner of realpolitik [realistic, not idealistic, politics], but he also knew how to play with his other hand the rousing chords of America's exceptionalism, the sense that America strength in world because of its virtuous nature. Both the hard power that came from its strategic might and the soft power that flowed from the appeal of its ideals and culture would, he realized, be equally important in assuring its influence. In his diplomacy, as in his personal business, he was "a man who believed in the power of reason and the reality of virtue," declared the writer and mathematician Condorcet, who became one his best French friends...



After a full year of deflecting requests for an alliance, the French were suddenly impatient as 1777 drew to a close. They were prodded not only by America's success at Saratoga and the completion of their own naval rearmament program, but also by a new gambit by Franklin. He began to play the French and British off against one another and let each side discover—and here is where he relied on the spies he knew were in his midst—how eager the other side was for a deal... So during the first week of 1778, Franklin applied pressure. He let word leak to the press that British emissaries were in town and that they might reach a pact with the Americans if the French did not do so promptly. Such a pact, the stories went, might even include American support for Britain's efforts to capture France's islands in the West Indies... Franklin was told that the king would assent to the treaties—one in friendship and trade, the other creating a military alliance—even without the participation of Spain. France made one stipulation: America could not make peace with Britain in the future without France's consent. And so the treaties of friendship and alliance were won...

Louis XVI made the Franco-American treaties official by receiving the three commissioners at Versailles on March 20. Crowds gathered at the palace gates to catch a glimpse as the face of the famous American, and they shouted "Vive Franklin" as his coach passed through the gold-crested gates... Seeing no reason to abandon the simple style that had served him well, he dressed in a plain brown suit with his famous spectacles as his only adornment. He did not wear a sword and, when he discovered that the wig he had bought for the occasion did not sit well on his head, decided to forsake it as well...

After a midafternoon dinner hosted by Vergennes, Franklin had the honor, if not pleasure, of being allowed to stand next to the queen, the famously haughty Marie-Antoinette, as she played the gaming tables. Alone among the throng at Versailles, she seemed to have little appreciation for the man who, she had been told, had once been "a printer's foreman." As she noted dismissively, a man of that background would never have been able to rise so high in Europe. Franklin would have proudly agreed.



[Franklin meeting Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette at Versailles]