

## ***The American Revolutionary Period***

### **The Age of Reason**

There were two colonial regions located below the area of New England. There were large plantations to the south in which slaves brought from Africa were forced to work. And the area between New England and the South, which consisted of smaller farms worked by independent farmers and in which there were trading cities, such as New York. Both regions had a variety of religions and no specific religious group dominated, as the Puritans had in their time. The absence of such dominance and the need for cooperation in order to prosper brought on a singular atmosphere of religious tolerance. This liberty originated a spirit of rational inquiry and skepticism by the intellectuals concerning accepted religious precepts.

This reliance on reason reflected and was nourished by an emerging tendency in Europe during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which was to be known as the Enlightenment. The philosophy of the Enlightenment was predominantly materialistic, as opposed to the religious and spiritual concerns during the preceding centuries. Instead of concentrating on supernatural beliefs, it concentrated upon observations of nature; instead of turning to God, it trusted the capacity of man; and instead of relying on faith, it resorted to reason.

These intellectual transformations brought great consequences to the development of knowl-

#### **Benjamin Franklin** (January 17, 1706 – April 17, 1790)

The most successful person to represent the values of the Enlightenment in America. He was also one of the most well-known Founding Fathers of the United States. He was a leading author, politician, printer, scientist, philosopher, publisher, inventor, civic activist, and diplomat. As a scientist he was a major figure in the history of physics for his discoveries and theories regarding electricity. As a political writer and activist he, more than anyone, invented the idea of an American nation, and as a diplomat during the American Revolution, he secured the French alliance that made independence possible.

Franklin was noted for his curiosity, his writings (popular, political and scientific), and his diversity of interests. His writings are proverbial for being wise and scintillating to this day, he was capable of frequent amusing and perceptive comments such as:

- "Fish and visitors stink in three days."
- "Eat to please yourself but dress to please others."
- "Neither a fortress or a virgin will hold out long after they begin to negotiate."
- "Keep your eyes wide open before marriage and half shut afterwards."
- "Where there is marriage without love, there will be love without marriage."

As a leader of the Enlightenment, he gained the recognition of scientists and intellectuals across Europe. He was an early proponent of colonial unity; historians hail him as the "First American."

edge. Philosophy, which had worked on the side of the theology, became the most valuable agent of enlightenment. By means of reason the human being was able to get to know himself as well as the world around him. These were considered the only subjects of worthwhile and possible knowledge. Immediate, natural or human activity predominated in the changing minds of men whether observing the stars or measuring space, organizing the state or discovering practical morality. Both Amateurs and professionals engaged themselves in scientific experimentation on a daily basis.

The philosophical attitude of the Enlightenment offered Americans an approach to life that was direct, immediate and practical. These qualities were the qualities which the settlers and traders, admired and needed while they constantly advanced over the frontiers of the swift developing American colonies. The Enlightenment thus appealed to numerous American followers, mainly in the locations where religious liberty and skepticism could tolerate its secular, rationalist ideas. Enlightenment came to vouch for attitudes which were necessary to American culture: distrust of the mystical, belief in the world revealed by the senses, confidence in progress, and certainty that man has the capacity to solve all problems of humanity.

Born in Boston, Massachusetts to a devout Anglican tallow-maker. Franklin learned printing from his older brother and became a newspaper editor, printer, and merchant in Philadelphia, becoming very wealthy. He spent many years in England and published the famous *Poor Richard's Almanac* and the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. He formed both the first public lending library and fire department in America as well as the Junto, a political discussion club. During this period he wrote in favor of paper money, against mercantilist policies such as the Iron Act of 1750, he also drafted, in 1754, the Albany Plan of Union, which would have created a continental legislature, showing how early he conceived of the colonies as being naturally one political unit.

Franklin was interested in science and technology, carrying out his famous electricity experiments and inventing, in addition to his very important lightning rod, the Franklin stove, the catheter, swimfins, the glass harmonica, and bifocals. He also played a major role in establishing the University of Pennsylvania and Franklin and Marshall College. He was elected the first president of the American Philosophical Society, the oldest learned society in the United States, in 1769. Franklin was fluent in five languages. He is typically recognized as a polymath.



The selection below was taken from the *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin, allegedly intended to be used for the instruction of his son. The writing reveals a personality consistently acting in terms of simplicity, functionality and practicality, all of which are the distinguishing qualities of the new American character

### Autobiography

I began now gradually to pay off the debt I was under for the printing house. In order to secure my credit and character as a tradesman, I took care not only to be in "reality" industrious and frugal, but to avoid all "appearances" to the contrary. I dressed plainly; I was seen at no places of idle diversion. I never went out a fishing or shooting; a book, indeed, sometimes debauched me from my work, but that was seldom, snug, and gave no scandal; and, to show that I was not above my business<sup>1</sup>, I sometimes brought home the paper I purchased at the stores through the streets on a wheelbarrow, Thus being esteemed an industrious, thriving young man, and paying duly for what I bought, the merchants who imported stationery solicited my custom; others proposed supplying me with books; I went on swimmingly<sup>2</sup>.

There remained now no competitor with me at Philadelphia but the old one, Bradford, who was rich and easy, did a little printing now and then, but was not very anxious about it. However, as he kept the post office, it was imagined he had better opportunities of obtaining news; his paper was thought a better distributor of advertisements than mine, and therefore had many more, which was a profitable thing to him, and a disadvantage to me; for, though I did indeed receive and send papers by the post, yet the public opinion was otherwise, for what I did send was by bribing the riders, who took them privately, Bradford being unkind enough to forbid it, which occasioned some resentment on my part; and I thought so meanly of him for it, that when I afterward came into his situation I took care never to imitate it.

It was about this time I conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wished to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined. While my care was employed in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised sometimes by another; habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason. I concluded, at length, that the mere speculative conviction that it was our interest to be completely virtuous was not sufficient to prevent our slipping; and that the contrary habits must be broken, and

good ones acquired and established, before we can have any dependence on a steady, uniform rectitude of conduct. For this purpose I therefore contrived the following method.

In the various enumerations of the moral virtues I had met with in my reading, I found the catalogue more or less numerous, as different writers included more or fewer ideas under the same name. Temperance, for example, was by some confined to eating and drinking, while by others it was extended to mean the moderating of every other pleasure, appetite, inclination, or passion, bodily or mental, even to our avarice and ambition. I proposed to myself, for the sake of clearness, to use rather more names, with fewer ideas annexed to each, than a few names with more ideas; and I included under thirteen names of virtues all that at that time occurred to me as necessary or desirable, and annexed to each a short precept, which fully expressed the extent I gave to its meaning.

These names of virtues, with their precepts, were:

1. TEMPERANCE. Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.
2. SILENCE. Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation.
3. RESOLUTION. Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve.
4. ORDER. Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.
5. FRUGALITY. Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; i.e., waste nothing.
6. INDUSTRY. Lose no time; be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.
7. SINCERITY. Use no hurtful deceit; think innocently and justly, and, if you speak, speak accordingly.
8. JUSTICE. Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty.
9. MODERATION. Avoid extremes; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.
10. CLEANLINESS. Tolerate no uncleanness in body, clothes, or habitation.
11. TRANQUILITY. Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.
12. CHASTITY. Rarely use venery<sup>3</sup> but for health or offspring, never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.
13. HUMILITY. Imitate Jesus and Socrates.

### DISCUSSION

1. State the specific aspects in the writing of Franklin which show his orientation within the Enlightenment.
2. From the above selection identify characteristics considered typically American.
3. Considering the virtues Franklin tried to practice, could he have had any faults?
4. What present customs still show the influence of the Enlightenment?

<sup>1</sup> superior

<sup>2</sup> successfully

<sup>3</sup> sex