Benjamin Franklin: Transition from Loyalist to Patriot

Perhaps you've heard of Benjamin Franklin: Printer, Inventor, Philosopher, Scientist, and any other role one could imagine. Franklin was a key player in many scenes of the American revolution and many of those leading up to it. However, few people know the role Franklin played early in his life. He was a strong believer in the king and British Parliament, and even recommended King George III make Pennsylvania a royal colony. Yet he played a powerful role in overthrowing the British government and in the creation of a new nation. His change in heart was ultimately due to the English government's inability to compromise with its colonies.

Franklin's story begins in Boston, Massachusetts where he was born in January 1706, the youngest son of seventeen children. His early life was that of a scholar; he was put into the grammar school at the age of eight, his father intending him to devote him to the service of the church. After a year of grammar school, due to financial worries, his father placed him in a school for writing and arithmetic, where he excelled in writing but made no progress in arithmetic. At the age of ten, Franklin was brought home to assist his father in the candle and soap businesses, where he was unhappy and longed for the sea. His love for reading determined his father to make him a printer, and at the age of ten sent him to apprentice with his brother James, a printer newly established in Boston.

There, Franklin quickly learned the trade and became an important asset in his brother's shop. It was there that he began to perfect his writing by studying the works of others and writing works of his own. It was through this reading that he determined to become a vegetarian. He felt he could to save time and money by preparing meatless meals. It was through his brother's newspaper, which hit the streets beginning in 1720 or 1721, that he became involved in politics. James' newspaper, The New England Courant, featured witty
editorials written by James and his friends, and Benjamin wanted to contribute. Because of
the master-and-apprentice relationship he had with his brother, he wrote letters (published
every fortnight from April to October 1722) under the pseudonym of Silence Dogood, which he
left under the door of the print shop. “The letters poked fun at various aspects of life in
colonial America, such as the drunkenness of locals and the fashion[able] hoop petticoats.”

It was around the time that Dogood’s letters ceased to appear in the newspaper that
Franklin took over as editor of the *New England Courant* after his brother was ordered by the
assembly to cease printing (as a result of James’ negative editorials about the government). As part of the arrangement, Benjamin’s indenture (which bound him as James’ apprentice
until the age of 21) was dissolved. Before long, differences in opinion between the two
brothers resulted in Benjamin’s flight from Boston (where he was unable to find work as a
printer) to New York at the young age of seventeen.

In New York, Franklin met William Bradford, who had been the first printer in
Pennsylvania. Upon inquiry of a job, he was advised to seek employment with Bradford’s son
in Amboy, Pennsylvania. He made his way there, and was referred by Andrew Bradford to
Keimer, who was just entering the trade of printing, being a writer of poetry and verse. It
was while at Keimer’s shop that Franklin made a name for himself, and was offered the
business of the local and state governments by Governor William Keith. In April 1724,
Franklin returned to Boston to ask his father for financial help in setting up a print shop in
Philadelphia, only to depart again with his family’s blessing but no money. Unfortunately,
when he was sent to London with letters of recommendation from Keith and the intention of
buying a printing press, he discovered that while the governor meant well, he did not have
any support to offer Franklin.

After being stranded in London for several months, he returned to find that the
governor was no longer in power, the woman he had been courting (Deborah Read, his future wife) had married another man, and Keimer had expanded his business. For a short while, Franklin returned to work alongside him, but when Keimer became increasingly irritated regarding the rates he was paying him, Franklin opened his own print shop with the help of Hugh Meredith (another man who worked under Keimer). His business thrived after he was offered government contracts upon discovery of Franklin's work ethic.

In 1728, Franklin fathered his first son, William, with an unknown woman. Two years later, he finally married Deborah Read, whose former husband had run away from debt. During this time, Franklin's partner in the business chose to leave the partnership and move south to farm. Following the purchase of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Franklin wrote many articles for the newspaper and produced the first political cartoon (left), which is well-known to most historians. Throughout the 1730s, Franklin worked to better himself by making daily checklists to reinforce his virtues, in addition to learning foreign languages and expanding his knowledge through reading. In 1733, Franklin began publishing *Poor Richard's Alamanack*, which provided annual predictions, recipes, and weather reports, and was written under the pseudonym Richard Saunders. In 1748, Franklin would sell his printing business.

One of Franklin's more important contributions to society was the library, which was set up so that people could read a greater variety of books for less money, and the Franklin stove, which better heated homes at the expense of less fuel. He also created “a company for the more ready extinguishing of fires and mutual assistance in removing and securing of goods when in danger”, today known as a fire department. In 1744, Franklin formed the American Philosophical Society. The same year, disturbed by the war in Europe and the lack of support for a militia in the Quaker assembly, he prepared a pamphlet, gave a speech,
and received tremendous support for the defense of the city. In 1749 he helped to open an academy (later to become the University of Philadelphia), in 1751 a hospital, and in 1753 he founded the Philadelphia Contribution for Insurance Against Loss by Fire, the first insurance agency.

In the early 1750s, Franklin's interests turned to science and innovation, particularly the science of electricity. The experiment involving a kite and a key is his most famous experiment. This experiment helped Franklin to develop the lightning rod and explain the two elements of electricity (positive and negative charges). For this work, he received honorary degrees from the University of Saint Andres and the University of Oxford, and was inducted into the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural knowledge with the award of its Copley metal.

Also in the 1750s, Franklin became interested in politics. Earlier in his life, he had written little regarding politics in The Pennsylvania Gazette. He had once been the clerk for the Pennsylvania General Assembly, Franklin was elected to the same body as a representative from 1750 to 1764. As a representative, he obtained for his city paved streets and streetlights. As further proof of his practical genius, Franklin perfected the (oil-burning) streetlight by providing proper ventilation of smoke to improve light and reduce cleaning. He devised a unifying plan with which to provide security for Pennsylvania and the other colonies, a counsel with one member from each colony and administered by a president-general, approved by the crown. Following the plan's dismissal by England, Franklin spoke strongly of his plan and its eventual prevention of the coming conflict in his Autobiography.

"I am still of the opinion it would have been happy for both sides the water if it had been adopted. The colonies, so united, would have been sufficiently strong to have defended themselves; there would have been no need of troops
from England; of course the subsequent pretence for taxing America, and the bloody contest would have been avoided. But such mistakes are not new; history is full of the errors of states and princes.”

Franklin became acquainted with the British army when he helped General Braddock obtain supplies for his forces in the French and Indian War. While he assisted the General, he pointed out the vulnerability of his soldiers on their proposed route, and as it turned out, the General’s men were decimated in the way Franklin predicted. Soon after, as a service to his state, he took control of an army to protect the North-western frontier by constructing a series of forts. He performed his service admirably before returning to the Assembly.

The assembly sent him to England to represent Pennsylvania in a legal battle against the descendants of the Penn family to determine who should represent the colony. There he remained as a representative of not only Pennsylvania, but of Georgia, Massachusetts, and New Jersey as well. For most of his life, Franklin considered himself a loyal Englishman. England had many things America did not: arts, thinkers, and “witty conversation”. In fact, he may have stayed there permanently if it weren't for his wife's fear of travel. In 1765, back in England after a two-year respite in Pennsylvania, “Franklin was caught by surprise by America's overwhelming opposition to the Stamp Act”. He helped persuade Parliament to repeal the tax, but when the government turned back around to tax the colonies in a different way, he began to wonder about independence. He was beginning to see growing corruption in the mother country's politics and began to consider reviving his plan for unification of the colonies devised in 1754, this time without royal influence.

The event that established the break between Franklin's loyalty to the King was his release of the “Hutchinson Papers”. Thomas Hutchinson, appointed governor of Massachusetts, pretended to take the side of the people against England. “Franklin got a hold of some letters in which Hutchinson called for 'an abridgment of what are called English
After he published the letters in America, he was called to the English Foreign Ministry, where he was publicly condemned. In a letter printed in the *Public Advertiser* in August 1773, Franklin states that “The [English] government [has] been deceived almost to the fatal issue of declaring War against our colonies is certain; and it is equally certain that it is in their Power to make an honorable Sacrifice of the wicked Author…”, meaning that Parliament should make an example of Hutchinson. Nine days later, Franklin wrote “An Infallable Method to Restore Peace and Harmony” in the same paper.

> “The Method is plain and easy: Place the Americans in the same Individual Situation they were in before… [drop the] Revenue Act formed by Mr. Greenville; repeal the odious Tax on Tea; supersede the Board of Commissioners; let the Governors and Judges be appointed by the Crown, and paid by the People as usual; recall the Troops, except what are absolutely necessary for the preservation of the new-acquired Provinces… It was always the Boast of the Americans, that they could claim their…[Independence] from the Kingdom of Great Britain, and their Joy upon being re-admitted to all the Privileges of Englishmen will operate as a new Cement to a grateful and generous people, which will for ever ensure their future Loyalty and Obedience.”

It was very gradually that Franklin began to turn to independence, and he tried to convince the King and Parliament to take action and prevent a conflict. Unfortunately, Benjamin's change in position from loyalist to patriot split his family; his son William became a leader in the loyalist cause and became the Royal Governor of New Jersey from 1762 to 1776. For a large duration of the war, William lived in London, where he handled loyalist claims.

Leading up to the American Revolutionary War, Franklin played a sizable role gathering support for a revolution. He was elected to the Second Continental Congress, where he worked to draft the Declaration of Independence alongside Thomas Jefferson. In 1776, his was one of fifty-six signatures that started the open rebellion. Shortly after the signing, Franklin acted as ambassador to France, where he found admiration in King Louis XVI as the
“man who had tamed lightning” and with the ladies, as his wife had passed away a few years earlier. Through his persuasion, France signed an alliance with America in 1778 and established loans for America's benefit. He remained to maintain French support through the Treaty of Paris in 1783, which gave America its independence.

Franklin's last major contribution to the nation was the Constitution, which he helped to draft. The constitution, which was drafted to replace the Articles of Confederation (which unified the thirteen colonies under the Continental Congress, which had very few powers. The new Constitution of the United States established a strong central government which was made up of three separate branches (Executive, Judicial, and Legislative), each with certain powers and ways to curtail the other branches' powers. Franklin argued that the new government gave too much power to the new federal government. However, when the convention came to a close, he conveyed an important message.

"In these sentiments, sir, I agree to this Constitution with all its faults—if they are such—because I think a general government necessary for us, and there is no form of government but what may be a blessing to the people if well administered... I doubt, too, whether any other convention we can obtain may be able to make a better Constitution; for, when you assemble a number of men, to have the advantage of their joint wisdom, you inevitably assemble with those men all their prejudices, their passions, their errors of opinion, their local interests, and their selfish views. It therefore astonishes me, sir, to find this system approaching so near to perfection as it does; and I think it will astonish our enemies, who are waiting with confidence to hear that our counsels are confounded like those of the builders of Babel, and that our States are on the point of separation, only to meet hereafter for the purpose of cutting one another's throats. Thus I consent, sir, to this Constitution, because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best. The opinions I have had of its errors I sacrifice to the public good... I hope, therefore, for our own sakes, as a part of the people, and for the sake of our posterity, that we shall act heartily and unanimously in recommending this Constitution wherever our influence may extend, and turn our future thoughts and endeavors to the means of having it well administered."

As it turned out, the Constitution was ratified and still survives today. The greatest ingenuity of the document was its ability to be changed to meet the nation's needs, as it has been
twenty-seven times. Of course, it would be interesting to see how Franklin, or any other framer of the constitution, would react to the power of the federal government today.

Franklin died on April 17, 1790 at the age of 84. 20,000 people attended the funeral of the man who played arguably the most important role of anyone in this period of history. 65

It is amazing that any person could make so many contributions in so many areas. Franklin was a key diplomat throughout his lifetime, but especially in his role as ambassador to France during the Revolutionary War. He made ever-important discoveries in science, especially through his contributions in the understanding of electricity. He invented more items than most are aware of, including the bifocals, Franklin stove, glass armonica (a musical instrument), lightning rod, and swim fins, as well as improving other innovations such as streetlights. He created a number of services including the library, fire department. To top it off, he provided leadership in a number of capacities through the French and Indian Wars, the Revolutionary War, and the creation of a new nation.

More amazing is his change of heart over the course of history, from a determined loyalist to a strong supporter of independence. While it is impossible to determine how history may have changed if he had remained loyal to the crown, his role in convincing the French to support the American cause was an important job that may not have been completed by a lesser man.
Notes


15 *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 43.


17 *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 70.


24 *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 121.


26 *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 150.


28 *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 140.

29 *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 141.

30 *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 150, 156.


32 *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 156.

33 *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 201.


40 *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 182.


42 *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 201.


44-52 *The Political Scene*. 
54 Verner W. Crane, ed., 233.
58-63 A New Nation.
65 A New Nation.
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