FREEDOM STORIES

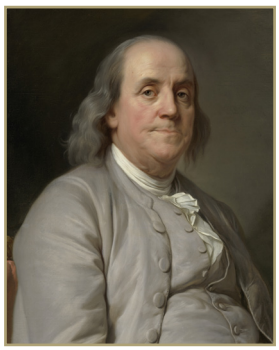
Benjamin Franklin

January 17, 1706

The Long Inheritance of Liberty

Historical Spotlight

Benjamin Franklin was our first great diplomat. He arrived at his understanding of liberty by way of ink, argument, correspondence, and conscience, shaped on both sides of the Atlantic. Born in Boston in 1706 to a family steeped in the dissenting Protestant culture of New England, Franklin truly inherited a worldview formed by English Nonconformists, and a good dash of Puritan sober-mindedness. Liberty, to Franklin, was not rebellion for its own sake but ordered freedom grounded in virtue, reason, and moral restraint.



Though never orthodox in theology, Franklin absorbed the ethical framework of Protestant dissent as a studied inheritance. He recognized the dignity of the individual conscience, the suspicion of concentrated power, and the conviction that self-government requires self-control. These ideas matured during his long years in London and Paris, where he moved easily among philosophers, printers, clergy, and statesmen, becoming a priceless bridge between the Old World's ideas and the New World's experiment.

When independence finally came, Franklin understood its gravity more clearly than most. At the signing of the Declaration of Independence, he famously observed, *"We must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately."* The remark was characteristically wry, but its meaning was deadly serious. This was no abstract exercise in Enlightenment theory; it was a collective act of defiance that placed lives, fortunes, and families at risk. Treason carried with it a high cost.

Franklin paid that cost in a deeply personal way. His son William, educated in England during Franklin's long absences, returned not as a patriot but as a Loyalist and royal governor of New Jersey. The Revolution fractured them: William sided with the Crown, was imprisoned by patriots, and never fully reconciled with his father. Franklin's indispensable service to liberty came at the lasting loss of a relationship never fully healed.

Contemporaries recognized both Franklin's greatness and his humanity. George Washington, too, held Franklin in profound esteem, relying on his diplomatic genius to secure French support at the war's most desperate hour. Others remarked on Franklin's steady temperament, his refusal to indulge in bitterness, and his ability to persuade without arrogance. An uncannily rare combination.

What this means for us

During a moment of deadlock at the Constitutional Convention, Benjamin Franklin, then eighty-one years old, rose to speak: *"I have lived, Sir, a long time, and 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 aid?"*

– James Madison, Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787, entry for June 28th, 1787

Portrait by Joseph Duplessis, 1778