

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, a celebrated American statesman, diplomat, author, and natural philosopher, noted for his earnest and fruitful services in the cause of American independence, was born at Boston, Mass., Jan. 17, 1706, and died at Philadelphia, April 17, 1790. His father was a tallow-chandler and had a large family, but he managed to give Benjamin a little schooling, which he industriously supplemented by private reading, and by an apprenticeship to his elder brother James, who in connection with a small printing establishment published a newspaper called "The New England Courant." For this journal Benjamin wrote a number of articles and quickly acquired a good style as a writer, picked up by habits of sedulous reading, especially of good English authors, such as Bunyan, Locke, and Addison. The political environment of Boston was then not very favorable to independent writing, and his brother having got into trouble with the authorities over some political critique that had given offence, Benjamin one day got on board a sloop for New York and casting about for employment found his way to Philadelphia. There he took to the printing trade and secured the favorable notice of Governor Sir Wm. Keith and other prominent citizens. The Governor effusively desired to aid young Franklin in his printing industries and promised to procure a printing-press and type for him in London if the embryo journalist-printer would go thither. Franklin eagerly assented to this, but when he sailed it was found that the Governor had either changed his mind or neglected to fulfill his promise, so that when Franklin reached London he had there to toil for his daily bread. He worked as a printer in London until 1726, when he returned to Philadelphia, and went back to his old employer. Subsequently he managed to establish a printing business for himself, and in 1729 he bought the "Pennsylvania Gazette," and eventually placed it at the head of American journals. In 1731, he established the first circulating library on the Continent, and in the following year began the publication of "Poor Richard's Almanac," which was continued for a quarter of a century. It was at this period of his life that Franklin by private study acquired considerable familiarity with the Latin, French, Italian, and Spanish languages. As a New World publicist he is, as has been said of him, "the real starting-point of American literature. As he was the first American scientific discoverer of renown, the first American diplomatist, the founder of the first public library, and of the first permanent philosophical society in this country, so he was the first writer in the field of general literature. His writings are full of acute thought on practical themes, and suited to the genius of a busy people engrossed with their outward affairs." In 1736, he was chosen a clerk of the General Assembly, and was reelected in the following year. He was then returned a member of the Assembly, and held that post for ten successive years. In 1737, he was appointed Deputy Postmaster of the colonies under the Crown. About this period he organized the first police force and fire company in the colony, and a few years later initiated the movements which led to the paving of the streets, to the creation of an hospital, to the organization of a military force, and to the foundation of the University of Pennsyl-

(252)

vania and of the American Philosophical Society. It was while he was engaged in these miscellaneous avocations that he made the discovery, by a simple experiment with a kite, that lightning is a discharge of electricity, and for this, in 1753, he received from the Royal Society of England the Copley medal, and placed himself among the most eminent of natural philosophers. In 1754, when war with France was impending, Franklin, who, by this time, had become the leading public man in Pennsylvania, was sent to a Congress of Commissioners from the different colonies, ordered by the Lords of Trade to convene at Albany to devise a plan for their common defence. In the following year Franklin was appointed the agent of Pennsylvania in England, where he sojourned some five years. He returned to America in 1762, but two years later he was again sent to the mother country as the special agent of Pennsylvania, and he was in London at the time of the repeal of the Stamp Act, a step which he powerfully furthered. Subsequently while continuing to represent Pennsylvania, he was commissioned to act as agent for Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Georgia, and for some years exercised an influence such as probably has never been possessed by any other American representative at the English Court. In 1775, when he saw that a conflict between the mother country and the colonies was almost inevitable, he again set sail for Philadelphia, and on the morning of his arrival was elected by the Assembly a delegate to the Continental Congress which placed George Washington at the head of the colonial armies. By this Congress Franklin, who eighteen months before had been dismissed from the office of Deputy Postmaster, which he had held under the Crown, was made Postmaster-General of the united colonies. In 1776, he was one of the Committee of Five which drew up the "Declaration of Independence." In the same year he was chosen president of the convention called to frame a constitution for the State of Pennsylvania. He was selected by Congress to discuss terms of peace with Admiral Lord Howe in July, 1776, and in the following September was deputed with John Adams and Arthur Lee to solicit assistance from the Court of Louis XVI. On his arrival in Paris, he found himself already one of the most talked of men in the world. He was a member of every important learned society in Europe; one of the managers of the Royal Society, and one of the eight foreign members of the Royal Academy of Sciences at Paris. The story of Franklin's mission to Versailles has no parallel in the history of diplomacy. He became at once an object of greater popular interest than any other man in France, an interest which during his eight years' sojourn in that country seemed ever on the increase. The French Academy paid him its highest honors, and he conferred distinction upon any *salon* he frequented. He moreover animated French society with a boundless enthusiasm for the cause of the rebel colonists, persuaded the government that the interests of France required her to aid them, and finally, at a crisis in their fortunes, obtained a treaty of alliance in the winter of 1777-78. In the six following years he secured advances in money amounting to 26,000,000 francs, a sum that may well astonish us when we consider that at the time France was practically bankrupt. After signing the treaty of peace with Great Britain in 1783, Franklin, now seventy-seven years of age, requested to be relieved from duty, but it was not until 1785 that Congress permitted him to return to America. Soon after his arrival in Philadelphia, he was made chairman of the Municipal Council, and subsequently President of the State by an almost unanimous vote. To that office he was twice unanimously reelected, and was also chosen a member of the Convention which convened in 1787 to frame a Federal Constitution. During the last two years of Franklin's life he helped to organize the first society formed on the American Continent for the abolition of slavery, and as its president signed the earliest remonstrance against slavery addressed to the American Congress. He died at Philadelphia in his 84th year. Among the notable works he left be-

hind him is an "Autobiography," a charming and entertaining production. His works have been edited by John Bigelow and by Jared Sparks. "Franklin's literary work," observes a biographer, "was a part and a product of his unceasing activity. Always doing or observing, he was always thinking and learning; and what he thought and learned he was ready to communicate at once to some one of his numerous correspondents who would be interested by it or might derive advantage from it. When his observations had borne fruit in some discovery or practicable scheme, he embodied the result in some essay or paper, which likewise, most usually, took the form of a letter to a friend. . . . Though he was a voluminous writer, and one of the great masters of English expression, Franklin habitually wrote with a single eye to immediate practical results. He never posed for posterity."

THE FEDERAL CONSTITUTION

DELIVERED IN THE CONVENTION FOR FRAMING THE CONSTITUTION OF
THE UNITED STATES, PHILADELPHIA, 1787

I CONFESS that I do not entirely approve of this Constitution at present; but, sir, I am not sure I shall never approve it, 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. It is therefore that, the older I grow, the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment of others. Most men, indeed, as well as most sects in religion, think themselves in possession of all truth, and that wherever others differ from them, it is so far error. Steele, a Protestant, in a dedication, tells the Pope that the only difference between our two churches in their opinions of the certainty of their doctrine is, the Romish Church is infallible, and the Church of England is never in the wrong. But, though many private persons think almost as highly of their own infallibility as of that of their sect, few express it so naturally as a certain French

lady, who, in a little dispute with her sister, said: "But I meet with nobody but myself that is always in the right."

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; and I believe, further, that this is likely to be well administered for a course of years, and can only end in despotism, as other forms have done before it, when the people shall become so corrupted as to need despotic government, being incapable of any other. 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. From such an assembly can a perfect production be expected? 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 have never whispered a syllable of them abroad. Within these walls they were born, and here they shall die. If every one of us, in returning to our constituents, were to report the objections he has had to it, and endeavor to gain partisans in support of them, we might pre-

vent its being generally received, and thereby lose all the salutary effects and great advantages resulting naturally in our favor among foreign nations, as well as among ourselves, from our real or apparent unanimity. Much of the strength and efficiency of any government, in procuring and securing happiness to the people, depends on opinion, on the general opinion of the goodness of that government, as well as of the wisdom and integrity of its governors. 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.

On the whole, sir, I cannot help expressing a wish that every member of the convention who may still have objections to it, would, with me, on this occasion, doubt a little of his own infallibility, and, to make manifest our unanimity, put his name to this instrument.

DANGERS OF A SALARIED BUREAUCRACY

DELIVERED IN THE CONVENTION FOR FORMING THE CONSTITUTION OF THE
UNITED STATES, PHILADELPHIA, 1787

IT IS with reluctance that I rise to express a disapprobation of any one article of the plan for which we are so much obliged to the honorable gentlemen who laid it before us. From its first reading I have borne a good will to it, and, in general, wished it success. In this particular of salaries to the executive branch, I happen to differ;

and, as my opinion may appear new and chimerical, it is only from a persuasion that it is right, and from a sense of duty, that I hazard it. The committee will judge of my reasons when they have heard them, and their judgment may possibly change mine. I think I see inconveniences in the appointment of salaries; I see none in refusing them, but, on the contrary, great advantages.

Sir, there are two passions which have a powerful influence in the affairs of men. These are ambition and avarice; the love of power and the love of money. Separately, each of these has great force in prompting men to action; but, when united in view of the same object, they have, in many minds, the most violent effects. Place before the eyes of such men a post of honor, that shall, at the same time, be a place of profit, and they will move heaven and earth to obtain it. The vast number of such places it is that renders the British Government so tempestuous. The struggles for them are the true source of all those factions which are perpetually dividing the nation, distracting its councils, hurrying it sometimes into fruitless and mischievous wars, and often compelling a submission to dishonorable terms of peace.

And of what kind are the men that will strive for this profitable pre-eminence, through all the bustle of cabal, the heat of contention, the infinite mutual abuse of parties, tearing to pieces the best of characters? It will not be the wise and moderate, the lovers of peace and good order, the men fittest for the trust. It will be the bold and the violent, the men of strong passions and indefatigable activity in their selfish pursuits. These will thrust themselves into your government, and be your rulers. And these, too, will be mistaken in the expected happiness of

their situation, for their vanquished competitors, of the same spirit, and from the same motives, will perpetually be endeavoring to distress their administration, thwart their measures, and render them odious to the people.

Besides these evils, sir, though we may set out in the beginning with moderate salaries, we shall find that such will not be of long continuance. Reasons will never be wanting for proposed augmentations; and there will always be a party for giving more to the rulers, that the rulers may be able, in return, to give more to them. Hence, as all history informs us, there has been in every state and kingdom a constant kind of warfare between the governing and the governed; the one striving to obtain more for its support, and the other to pay less. And this has alone occasioned great convulsions, actual civil wars, ending either in dethroning of the princes or enslaving of the people. Generally, indeed, the ruling power carries its point, and we see the revenues of princes constantly increasing, and we see that they are never satisfied, but always in want of more. The more the people are discontented with the oppression of taxes, the greater need the prince has of money to distribute among his partisans, and pay the troops that are to suppress all resistance, and enable him to plunder at pleasure. There is scarce a king in a hundred, who would not, if he could, follow the example of Pharaoh—get first all the people's money, then all their lands, and then make them and their children servants forever. It will be said that we do not propose to establish kings. I know it. But there is a natural inclination in mankind to kingly government. It sometimes relieves them from aristocratic domination. They had rather have one tyrant than five hundred. It gives more of the appearance of equality among

citizens; and that they like. I am apprehensive, therefore—perhaps too apprehensive—that the government of the States may, in future times, end in a monarchy. But this catastrophe, I think, may be long delayed, if in our proposed system we do not sow the seeds of contention, faction, and tumult, by making our posts of honor places of profit. If we do, I fear that, though we employ at first a number and not a single person, the number will, in time, be set aside; it will only nourish the fœtus of a king (as the honorable gentleman from Virginia very aptly expressed it), and a king will the sooner be set over us.

It may be imagined by some that this is a Utopian idea, and that we can never find men to serve us in the executive department without paying them well for their services. I conceive this to be a mistake. Some existing facts present themselves to me which incline me to a contrary opinion. The high sheriff of a county in England is an honorable office, but it is not a profitable one. It is rather expensive, and therefore not sought for. But yet it is executed, and well executed, and usually by some of the principal gentlemen of the county. In France, the office of counsellor, or member of their judiciary parliaments, is more honorable. It is therefore purchased at a high price; there are, indeed, fees on the law proceedings, which are divided among them, but these fees do not amount to more than three per cent on the sum paid for the place. Therefore, as legal interest is there at five per cent, they, in fact, pay two per cent for being allowed to do the judiciary business of the nation, which is, at the same time, entirely exempt from the burden of paying them any salaries for their services. I do not, however, mean to recommend this as an eligible mode for our judi-

ciary department. I only bring the instance to show that the pleasure of doing good and serving their country, and the respect such conduct entitles them to, are sufficient motives with some minds to give up a great portion of their time to the public, without the mean inducement of pecuniary satisfaction.

Another instance is that of a respectable society who have made the experiment and practiced it with success now more than a hundred years. I mean the Quakers. It is an established rule with them that they are not to go to law, but in their controversies they must apply to their monthly, quarterly, and yearly meetings. Committees of these sit with patience to hear the parties, and spend much time in composing their differences. In doing this, they are supported by a sense of duty and the respect paid to usefulness. It is honorable to be so employed, but it was never made profitable by salaries, fees, or perquisites. And, indeed, in all cases of public service, the less the profit, the greater the honor.

To bring the matter nearer home, have we not seen the greatest and most important of our offices, that of general of our armies, executed for eight years together, without the smallest salary, by a patriot whom I will not now offend by any other praise; and this, through fatigues and distresses, in common with the other brave men, his military friends and companions, and the constant anxieties peculiar to his station? And shall we doubt finding three or four men in all the United States with public spirit enough to bear sitting in peaceful council, for, perhaps, an equal term, merely to preside over our civil concerns, and see that our laws are duly executed? Sir, I have a better opinion of our country. I think we shall never be without

a sufficient number of wise and good men to undertake and execute well and faithfully the office in question.

Sir, the saving of the salaries, that may at first be proposed, is not an object with me. The subsequent mischiefs of proposing them are what I apprehend. And, therefore, it is that I move the amendment. If it be not seconded or accepted, I must be contented with the satisfaction of having delivered my opinion frankly and done my duty.