

Introduction

The Enemies of Benjamin Franklin

Barbara Oberg

Yale University

The Papers of Benjamin Franklin

Reputations of our heroes rise and fall. Sometimes those we idolize can do nothing wrong, or, at least, we excuse them their flaws, errors, and all too human quirks. In another mood we forgive them nothing and fasten upon their failings, the worst of which for the founders of the American republic was the unallowable fact that they lived in the eighteenth-century rather than the twentieth and failed to know all that we have learned over the last two hundred and fifty years. What once were seen as public virtues or matters of principle are now regarded as personal vindictiveness or self-aggrandizement. As post-utilitarians, post-Freudians, and post-moderns we *know* that Benjamin Franklin's, George Washington's, and Thomas Jefferson's motives were never pure, never untainted by self-interest. We expect them to be better than we are, and when they are not, we lash out at them like furies.

Benjamin Franklin's "cunning," "deviousness," "stubbornness," unrelenting hostility, and refusal to forgive his son William for remaining loyal to the king have come in for serious criticism in the last five years, just as Thomas Jefferson "bashing" has become routine among contemporary scholars, journalists, and the public. On the one hand, it is good for us to be reminded that every age has its petty politics and jealousies, that Franklin's remarkable abilities as an entrepreneur and organizer, his scientific genius, and his extraordinary skill as a diplomat did not exempt him from human passions and failings or even just plain irritability.

On the other hand, it is not that Franklin's or Jefferson's feet of clay have been discovered only in the twentieth century. All we need to do is peruse the correspondence, diaries, and public writings of Franklin's contemporaries to see all sorts of epithets attached to him. William Smith, Anglican clergyman and provost of the College of Philadelphia, called him an "inflammatory and virulent man," "crafty," "ambitious," and possessed of a "foul" mouth. To Thomas Penn he was a "weak and wicked man." John Adams referred to him as an "Old Conjuror." No modern writer could possibly say worse of Franklin than his own eighteenth-century enemies. Even Mark Twain's portrayal of Franklin as acting with "a malevolence which is without parallel in history" is tinged with humor, and D. H. Lawrence's dubbing him "bourgeois," "self-satisfied," and a "threat to the imagination and the spirit" is mild in comparison to Arthur Lee's and Ralph Izard's savage criticisms of Franklin on his mission to France.

A spate of recent scholarly publications, however, has rediscovered the “dark,” bitter, and self-serving side of Franklin. The most comprehensive of these works is Robert Middlekauff’s fine and lucid *Benjamin Franklin and His Enemies* (University of California Press, 1995). Looking at Franklin’s adversaries across a lifetime and on both sides of the Atlantic, Middlekauff uncovers Franklin’s passionate anger, the trait that on occasion rendered him incapable of separating men from measures and individuals from ideas. From John Penn and William Smith to Lee, Izard, and of course one of Franklin’s most serious adversaries, John Adams, Middlekauff weaves the story of Franklin’s animosities and in so doing reveals the character traits that intensified the battles and demonized the opponents.¹

Middlekauff’s book is an expansion of a paper that was read on his behalf at a symposium organized by Larry E. Tise on behalf of the Friends of Franklin and held at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia in January 1993. Middlekauff’s work set the tone and structure for the conference. The following three articles are representative of the other papers that were delivered at the symposium, and focus on different areas of Franklin’s personal, political, and intellectual life. John Frantz looks at some of his early political and cultural enemies, the Pennsylvania Germans and the election of 1764. Sheila Skemp considers “The Most Intimate Enemy,” Franklin’s only son, and reveals that as much as Franklin was embittered toward William, the son remained loyal throughout his life, refusing to criticize his father even when friends encouraged him to do so. Bernard Cohen provides an intellectual context for some of Franklin’s critics as he discusses not Franklin’s scientific enemies but his “scientist enemies,” the proponents within the scientific community of rival theories or inventions. Together these three articles complement Middlekauff’s general study and deepen our understanding of Franklin in the world, a world where people disagree strongly or even violently on matters, act from a mixture of personal and idealistic reasons, may be less able to forgive than they ought to be, and sometimes just rub each other the wrong way. In learning something about Franklin and his enemies we may also learn something about ourselves.

Editor's Note: A fourth article, by Barbara Gannon, considers Franklin's role in the 1747-48 Pennsylvania debate, unique in human history, as to whether a society should have any military defense at all, even a voluntary one.

Notes

1. Other examples of recent critical works are Francis Jennings, *Benjamin Franklin, Politician: The Mask and the Man* (New York and London, 1996), David T. Morgan, *The Devious Dr. Franklin, Colonial Agent: Benjamin Franklin's Years in London* (Macon, Ga., 1996), and Willard Sterne Randall, *A Little Revenge: Benjamin Franklin and His Son* (Boston, 1984).