

In a time of patriotism, celebrate life of one of our greatest thinkers.

Happy birthday, Mr. Franklin!

By Peter H. Gibbon

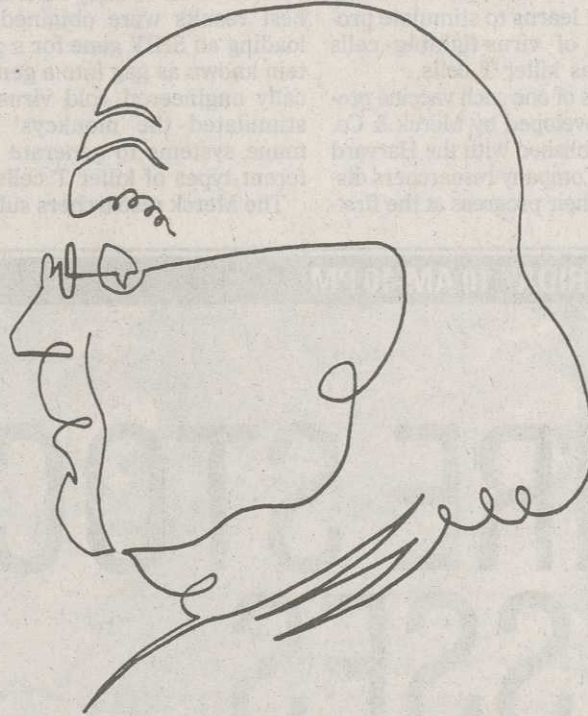
Today is Benjamin Franklin's birthday. In a celebrity age focused on the intimate life, how are we to view Franklin — our first homegrown, secular hero before the War for Independence?

We know him best as a hero of our early history. Franklin is the only founding father to sign the three key documents of early American history — the Declaration of Independence, the Treaty of Paris that ended the Revolutionary War, and the Constitution — all of which might not have happened without him. Never quick to praise a colleague, John Adams pointed out that Franklin's reputation surpassed that of Sir Isaac Newton, Frederick the Great, and Voltaire.

Also familiar is the view of Franklin as the Renaissance man, American-style. A self-made businessman, inventor, diplomat and philanthropist, Franklin was an advocate of daylight savings time, penal reform, an international organization of nations, good ventilation, and frequent bathing. He even made contributions to education, suggesting that Greek and Latin need not be the centerpiece of school curricula. Looking into the future, he predicted aerial navigation by dirigibles, a longer life span, and America's explosive growth in population.

Still familiar to Americans today are maxims from Franklin's colonial bestseller, *Poor Richard's Almanack*: "God helps them that help themselves" and "Fish and visitors stink in three days." Using pseudonyms, he wrote satirical essays mocking religious hypocrisy, the pretensions of a Harvard education, and the follies of an arrogant British Empire. As a humorist, he wrote *Drinker's Dictionary*, listing 100 synonyms for inebriation, and a famous, unpublished pamphlet, "Advice to a Young Man in the Choice of a Mistress," celebrating the sexual expertise of older women.

The more I get to know Franklin, the more I like him. To his children he wrote affectionate letters, for his wife a poem of praise. He eschewed backbiting and freely gave credit to fellow scientists and diplomats. He was also happy, serene and modest — rare qualities in a hero. Samuel Eliot Morison, preeminent historian of the 20th century, notes in an essay that he has read thousands of let-



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ters written by Franklin and never found him either mean or vindictive. Still, Franklin was not naive. In a 1780 letter looking ahead to a utopia where lives would be long and food abundant, he implies that men would probably still "be wolves to one another."

We may also view him as a man who redirected his own life. Here's how it went: In 1748, at 42, Franklin gives up a lucrative printing business to devote the rest of his life to seeking knowledge and doing good works. He invents the lightning rod and bifocal lenses; studies whirlwinds and waterspouts; speculates on the nature of sunspots; and charts the Gulf Stream. In his spare time, he sets up a laboratory and through a series of ingenious experiments, makes profound discoveries in electricity.

During the revolutionary crisis, Franklin gives up his scientific research to serve his country. He fights the Stamp Act, writes 126 newspaper articles defending American rights and becomes a delegate to the Continental Congress, which sends him to France in 1776, where two years later he helps negotiate a treaty that provides money and troops for a Colonial army short of supplies. At the end of the Revolution, Franklin returns from France and retires to Philadelphia, where in his 80s, he helps shape the

new Constitution and form the American Anti-Slavery Society.

On this day, we may best view Ben Franklin as a great disseminator and example of American values: tolerance, idealism, pragmatism, humor. He also helped create these values. His influential *Autobiography* injected into the American psyche the belief in the self-made man, a passion for self-improvement, the importance of philanthropy and public service, and, one might add, the value of simple, lucid writing.

To the Calvinist values Franklin inherited from his parents — thrift and hard work — he added the Enlightenment values of tolerance and reason. He was our first secular hero because, in addition to being a wise and kind man, he was a scientific genius, brilliant writer, philanthropist and astute diplomat. He is an important historical hero because his fusion of Puritan beliefs and Enlightenment values helped mold the American mind.

Shortly before Franklin died, George Washington wrote him:

"If to be venerated for benevolence, if to be admired for talents, if to be esteemed for patriotism, if

to be loved for philanthropy can gratify the human mind, you must have the pleasing consolation to know that you have not lived in vain."

In 1790, 20,000 people — the largest crowd Philadelphia had ever witnessed — followed Franklin's funeral cortege from his home to Christ Church burial ground. Bells tolled, militia fired their guns, and in the harbor, ships flew their flags at half mast.

For the last 40 years we have been comfortable believing the worst about the founders of America, looking for the dark side, and raising our children on revisionist history. The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks have, for the time being, resuscitated the gratitude, admiration and awe too long absent from our culture. It is my hope that our newly discovered patriotism will make us once again proud of our history and appreciative of the heroes of our past — the great men and women of America who in their own time faced danger, hardship and uncertainty, yet prevailed.

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