

# Ken Burns' *Benjamin Franklin*: The good and the bad of a Founding Father

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Benjamin Franklin is among the most important and fascinating figures of American history. Born the son of a Boston candlemaker in 1706, the runaway indentured servant and autodidact rose in Philadelphia as an artisan printer to become America's foremost publisher, scientist, philosopher, inventor and humorist. His accomplishments in these and other fields made him world famous already by the 1750s. No less than Kant called Franklin "the modern Prometheus."

Had Franklin stopped there he would be remembered today, alongside Jefferson, as the greatest of the Enlightenment's American exponents. But Franklin was not done. Retiring from the day-to-day work of publishing, he entered the world of British imperial politics, spending long years in London as the envoy of the Pennsylvania assembly and challenging the aristocratic Penn family's proprietary control of the colony.

Franklin was still in London when the revolutionary crisis erupted over the Stamp Act. He had been a loyal subject of the King and Empire, but Franklin was made to answer for the disobedient colonists. In 1774, his public humiliation before the Privy Council in Whitehall's "cockpit" made him fathom that the differences with the mother country were irreparable. At first slow to disentrail himself from monarchy, once Franklin made his break he moved more rapidly and more firmly than many others to the perspective of revolution. He risked much more than many in so doing: his fame, fortune and membership in Europe's learned societies.

Instead Franklin returned to America in 1775, where the war was already underway, helping to steer Pennsylvania behind independence—and in the process breaking irrevocably with his son William, the royal governor of New Jersey. Together with Jefferson and Adams, Franklin served on the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson, aged 33, wrote the document, but Franklin, 70, made one crucial change. The younger man had written, "*We hold these truths to be sacred & undeniable...*" Franklin, a notoriously irreligious deist, cut the reference to the "sacred." He thought equality should be rooted in science and objective fact—that it should be revealed as axiomatic. The resulting phrase is surely the most influential in the history of American letters: "*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal ...*"

Franklin was by far the most worldly of the Founding Fathers and was therefore selected to represent the young republic in France, where he was feted as a celebrity—in one event he was even embraced and kissed by Voltaire. Overcoming the House of Bourbon's instinctive fear and loathing of revolution, Franklin gained the necessary French financial and military support for the colonists—support Louis XVI would soon enough come to regret. Franklin returned to Philadelphia in 1787, where he helped secure the ratification of the Constitution.

Franklin managed all of this with extraordinary humor. Jefferson later recalled one example of his legendary wit:

When Dr Franklin went to France, on his revolutionary mission, his eminence as a philosopher, his venerable appearance, and the cause on which he was sent, rendered him extremely popular. ... He was therefore feasted and invited to all the court parties. At these he some times met the old Dutches of Bourbon, who being a chess player of about his force, they very generally played together. Happening once to put her king into prise, the Doctor took it. "Ah," says she, "we do not take kings so." "We do in America," said the Doctor.

A life of such length, richness and complexity does not lend itself to easy biographical summary. The task is made more difficult by the sediment of myth that has built over Franklin for 230 years. The Franklin legend, nearly as stultifying as that which once surrounded the names Washington and Lincoln, usually claimed that he was "the first" this or that: the first "businessman," the first "rags-to-riches story," the first "great American." Mark Twain once observed that Franklin's example had "brought affliction to millions of boys since," forced by their fathers to strictly follow advice such as "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise."

More recently, like the rest of the Founding Fathers, Franklin has come under attack as a racist, a hypocrite and a beneficiary of slavery—though slavery was not a source of controversy until after the American Revolution, at which point Franklin came out publicly against it. The attack on the leading figures of the American Revolution, epitomized by the *New York Times*' 1619 Project, is simply the inversion of the old narrative with demonology replacing hagiography. Both share the fatal weakness of anachronism. They evaluate the American Revolution from the standpoint of the moods and prejudices of the present.

Ken Burns' *Benjamin Franklin*, which aired last week on PBS and is currently available for streaming, strains to account for the good old Franklin and the bad new Franklin, while still giving viewers a sense of his times and his enormous accomplishments. The results, unsurprisingly, are mixed.

The first of the two-part, two-hour episodes is by far the weaker. Presented in a straight, chronological manner, one has the sense of watching a long list unfurl. The listing is largely focused on the good Franklin—the up-from-the-ranks story, the wit, the inventor, the scientist, etc. To the extent this is interesting, it is because Franklin's many feats, when presented together, are very nearly as astonishing to us as they were to his contemporaries.

On the other hand, the documentary gives us some facts about a different sort of Benjamin Franklin, one who can never live up to the standards of contemporary American identity and racist politics. So, we learn that Franklin was for a long time indifferent to American Indians, that he owned a few slaves as domestic servants, that he did not publicly oppose slavery before the Revolution, that he once complained of the

“Swarthy complexion” of Europeans who were not English, and that he all but abandoned his ailing wife for politics.

In Burns’ scale the good outweighs the bad. But his efforts to “absolve” Franklin lend a defensive air to the documentary. After hearing of Franklin’s racism, we are reminded of his courageous defense of the Susquehannock Indians, who were targeted in the blood revenge of Pennsylvania settlers in 1763. “*If an Indian injures me, does it follow that I may revenge that injury on all Indians?*” asked Franklin, whose outspokenness threatened his political career.

At the documentary’s conclusion, in a vignette called “Errata,” Burns has Franklin making amends for his earlier indifference to slavery by accepting the presidency of the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery, the first antislavery society on the planet, and by authoring a brilliant anti-slavery petition to Congress. Burns does not ask whether or not the American Revolution might have had something to do with Franklin’s change. In any case, Burns finds no inner connection between any of the “good” or the “bad.” They are all just so many discrete aspects of Franklin’s life.

Nor is Franklin the scientist, inventor, and publisher connected to Franklin the revolutionary, who emerges in the second episode. Here something of the actual drama of the Revolution, as well as Franklin’s role in it, comes across. We get a sense that victory was not preordained, that at times things hung in the balance. We see Franklin’s crucially important role in Philadelphia in 1776 and again in 1787, and, in between, his masterwork in France gaining international support for the Revolution. In this second installment, Franklin’s personal life—the tragic estrangement from his son and his larger-than-life personality in dealing with the French—intersects with the history.

Burns deploys all of his familiar documentary techniques in *Benjamin Franklin*. Honed in two dozen or so films to his credit, these methods have come to define the genre. The camera pans slowly across historical images and zooms in and out, as a narrator (Peter Coyote) speaks. Actors provide voice-overs. The rough-voiced Mandy Patinkin is Benjamin Franklin, and Josh Lucas gives voice to his son, William. Paul Giamatti reprises his role as the cantankerous (and Franklin-hating) John Adams, a role he delivered so effectively on screen in the HBO series *John Adams* of 2008. Liam Neeson appears briefly as Franklin’s Cockpit tormenter, House of Commons member Alexander Wedderburn (1733-1805).

Historians and Franklin biographers are interspersed to provide analysis and to help nudge the proceedings along. Among these are Gordon S. Wood, the author of an important biography of Franklin, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (2001) which places the man in his time, and Bernard Bailyn, the late Harvard historian of the colonial era and the American Revolution. There are probably a dozen other scholars interviewed, “a complement of historians of various ages, colors and genders” in the words of the *Los Angeles Times*. Most of the screen time is afforded to Walter Isaacson, the former president of CNN and author of a celebratory biography of Franklin. Many fine points are made, but the film does little to develop a narrative out of the expert commentary.

This problem is not new for Burns. His undeniable talent for visual storytelling has never been matched by depth of historical analysis. The airing of his epic, nine-part *The Civil War* in 1990 was a phenomenon. Attracting 15 million viewers, it captured the public’s enduring fascination with that titanic struggle. But the series did not explain *why* the Civil War happened or *why* the course of the fighting went the way it did, transforming the war between the states into the Second American Revolution.

Similar problems emerged in Burns’ *The Vietnam War* (2017). While the horrific and essentially criminal character of the fighting comes across in images, the war itself is presented as the outcome of a series of mistaken policy decisions. Burns does not acknowledge that it was waged as part of the drive for “an American Century,” for which several

presidents were prepared to “destroy the village to save it”—that is, to kill limitless numbers of Southeast Asians for geostrategic purposes.

Burns’ weakness of analysis reemerges with *Benjamin Franklin*. The viewer gains no sense of what forces could have produced such a genius, what drew him to the republican cause and, for that matter, what the American Revolution was. Of course, it may be protested that it is not even possible to make something approaching a coherent whole out of the many-sidedness of Franklin—the runaway indentured servant, the man on the rise, the publisher, the polymath and the revolutionist. But an understanding is possible.

Franklin lived in a time in which the best thought drew no sharp lines between science and philosophy. Scientists, or “natural philosophers” as they were then called, were fascinated by the hidden forces that dominated the natural world and that appeared to connect the universe: gravity, magnetism, the movement of the planets, air and wind currents and, of course, electricity.

The philosophy of the time was similarly fascinated by hidden forces—those bonds that appeared to attract *people* to each other and that cohered them in commerce and under governments and rulers. In his attention to both science and society, Franklin was therefore no different than Bacon, Locke, Descartes, Spinoza and other Enlightenment philosophers—or for that matter his friend Joseph Priestley (1733-1804), a sympathizer of the American and French revolutions who fled to Pennsylvania in 1793 a step or two ahead of Lord Pitt’s treason trials.

Both the scientific and philosophical elements of Enlightenment thought shared a belief in the perfectibility of man, if only the darkness of superstition could be replaced by the light of reason. Franklin’s science was therefore at once “abstract” and “applied”—there was no wall separating his calculations from his inventions, nor from their useful “felicitousness” for society. His studies in electricity, for example, led to his invention of the lightning rod, which at once saved lives and overturned the medieval conception that a vengeful God “smote” the buildings struck. The discovery angered the clerics of various persuasions, who followed evangelist Gilbert Tennent in calling lightning the “awful artillery of heaven.” To them, Franklin responded:

Surely the thunder of Heaven is no more supernatural than the rain, hail or sunshine of Heaven, against the inconvenience of which we guard by roofs and shades without scruple.

In Franklin’s case, the man was his age as few others have been. His long life straddled the Old World and the New, and the old monarchical age and the new bourgeois-democratic era. His rise from poverty and obscurity to the heights of science and politics demonstrates the enormous potential of the liberated human being, a basic tenet of Enlightenment thought. In this sense Franklin embodied, like no other Founding Father, the “self-evident truth” of human equality.



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