



LESSON 10:

Benjamin Franklin, Elder Statesman

OVERVIEW

In 1787, at the age of 84, Franklin once again found himself at the center of the effort to define and shape a new nation. Franklin was the oldest member of the Constitutional Convention, suffering from poor health and often in intense pain. Nonetheless, Franklin's experience as a seasoned diplomat and negotiator, combined with his keen observation of human nature, made him an ideal delegate to the Convention. His most important contributions were his spirit of compromise and strong desire for unity. He drew on both to play a significant role in brokering the "Great Compromise:" a legislature of two houses, one elected in proportion to population and one in which each state would have equal representation.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Read and interpret primary source documents to gain appreciation of Franklin's role at the Constitutional Convention.
- Perform research to identify some of the points contended at the Convention.
- Identify the reasons Franklin urged his fellow delegates to adopt the Constitution.
- Identify the diplomatic qualities Franklin brought to the 1787 Constitutional Convention.

TIME

This lesson and activity require two to three class periods.

MATERIALS

- Excerpts from the Preambles of the Albany Plan and the U.S. Constitution (included)
- Benjamin Franklin's "Speech in the Convention at the Conclusion of its Deliberations" in *The Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787 reported by James Madison: September 17*. Available at www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/debates/917.htm.
- "Points Argued at the Convention" worksheet

McREL STANDARDS

United States History

Standard 8. Understands the institutions and practices of the government created during the Revolution and changed to create the Constitution and the Bill of Rights

Language Arts

Standard 1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

Standard 6. Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts

LESSON AND ACTIVITY

1. Introduction

Begin class by explaining that today's discussion is going to focus on Franklin's role at the Constitutional Convention. Before providing students with any background information, ask them to tell you their general impressions of the Constitution. Encourage them to use any

characterizations, definitions, or general feelings that they have about the Constitution. As students begin to respond to the question, develop a list of impressions on the blackboard or overhead projector.

Overall, students are likely to have a favorable impression of the Constitution; they may know that the Constitution has something to do with the way our government is organized or how power is shared among different groups. Some may associate the Constitution with personal rights and many will know that the Constitution was created a long time ago. And hopefully, many students will recognize that the U.S. Constitution is alive and well today, and remains the supreme law of our nation.

2. You may want to remind students of the circumstances leading to the Constitutional Convention:

Shortly following the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, the Second Continental Congress enacted the Articles of Confederation, the first national government for the newly independent states.

Following the states' victory in the American Revolution, many thought that the government created by the Articles of Confederation was too weak to meet the political and economic issues facing a new nation.

In the summer of 1787, many states sent representatives to Philadelphia to attend a special meeting to discuss amending the Articles of Confederation. This meeting later became known as the Constitutional Convention, and rather than amend the Articles of Confederation, the Convention delegates decided to draft a completely new blueprint for the government. This new blueprint became the U.S. Constitution.

Exactly what this blueprint for a national government should look like was the subject of intense debate; states struggled over how the new federal government should be organized and how political power should be shared between the federal government and the individual states.

At 81, Benjamin Franklin was the elder statesman at the Convention. He was a seasoned politician and an internationally respected diplomat. His presence at the Convention lent prestige and legitimacy to the proceedings.

3. Reading and Discussion

Distribute excerpts from the Preambles from the Albany Plan and U.S. Constitution (included).

Remind the class that Franklin drafted the Albany plan in 1754, over thirty years before state delegates assembled in Philadelphia to draft a Constitution, and that Franklin was among the first to call for a union of colonies.

Ask students to read the handout and identify the similarities and differences between the two preambles. You may want to facilitate discussion with the following questions:

- Whose authority was needed to ratify the Albany Plan? (*Great Britain and the individual colonies*)
- Whose authority was needed to ratify the Constitution? (*We, the people*)
- Compare the governments set up by the Albany Plan and the Constitution. Which expresses a more democratic form of government? (*The Albany Plan Preamble refers to*

the consent of Great Britain and makes reference to individual colonial constitutions. The Preamble to the Constitution refers to “We, the People...do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

- Name one similarity between the preambles. (*Both were instigated, in part, by the perceived need to unify separate and independent colonies or states under one central government.*)
- Name one difference between the Preambles to the Albany Plan and the U.S. Constitution. (*The Preamble to the U.S. Constitution represents a proposal for unity among independent and free states. The Preamble to the Albany Plan represents a proposal of unity among colonial governments.*)

4. Research

Allow time for students to perform research (either in class or at home) to identify several of the issues contested at the Constitutional Convention, and complete the “Points Argued at the Convention” worksheet.

5. In-Class Reading

Have the students read “Speech in the Convention at the Conclusion of its Deliberations.” Share the following background information with students:

The Constitution, in its final form, represented a series of compromises. Franklin himself helped to broker the conflict between the smaller and larger states over representation in Congress. The larger states wanted proportional representation, which meant that states with larger populations would have more representatives in Congress than states with smaller populations. The smaller states did not want to be overpowered by the larger states and argued for equal representation, which would give states equal voting power, regardless of population size.

Franklin endorsed the “Great Compromise”: a legislature of two houses, one elected in proportion to the population and one in which each state would have equal representation. The compromise was accepted by a majority of the delegates.

The Constitution, in its final form, represented a series of compromises. Nearly every delegate to the Convention could identify something in the document with which they disagreed. Yet despite his own misgivings about the final document, Franklin urged his fellow delegates to accept its many compromises and sign the Constitution.

Students should answer the following questions after reading the speech:

- What were some of the points of disagreement at the Convention?
- Describe Franklin’s attitude toward the Constitution.
- How did Franklin defend the work of the Convention?
- Why did Franklin think that the delegates should sign the Constitution despite the fact that it was a flawed document?

6. Writing

When the Convention announced a plan for a new government, the public was surprised. A flurry of debate appeared in the newspapers. Both Federalists (those in favor of ratifying the constitution) and Anti-Federalists (those opposed) wrote scores of essays trying to convince

the public of the accuracy of their views. Ask students to write an essay of agreement or disagreement with regard to ratifying the constitution. Explain that they should refer to some of the assertions in Franklin's speech in their essay. Allow time for the students to brainstorm, outline, draft, and revise their essays either at home or in class.

ASSESSMENT

Students will be assessed based on their class participation and the content and quality of their final essays. An established rubric may be used to evaluate student writing.

ENRICHMENT

Students write an essay in support or dissent of the Constitution as it was written in 1787.

FURTHER RESOURCES

- Ellis, Joseph. *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*. (New York, Vintage Books, 2002).
- Isaacson, Walter. *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003).

The 1754 Albany Plan of Union

(Preamble): It is proposed that humble application be made for an act of Parliament of Great Britain, by virtue of which one general government may be formed in America, including all the said colonies, within and under which government each colony may retain its present constitution, except in the particulars wherein a change may be directed by the said act, as hereafter follows.

The U.S. Constitution

(Preamble): We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Points Argued at the Convention

DIRECTIONS: Use encyclopedias or online sources to identify and explain the more intensely debated issues at the Constitutional Convention.

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