

Editorial

What Ben Franklin had to say

Were Benjamin Franklin to come back from the grave today he would be shocked by many things in his America, and delighted by a few. Certainly that we now live in the age of electrification would be a source of satisfaction to him, since that was his dream.

Indeed he once prepared an all-electric Thanksgiving dinner for his friends, to demonstrate just this potentiality. The turkey was killed by a shock, cooked by battery power, and so on. He was profoundly interested in the scientific questions posed by electricity, but he was also keenly interested in every aspect of infrastructure development in the new nation he hoped to create. Roads, canals, and a postal service would be important, but crucial would be the potential leap in productivity, opened up by electrification.

In a letter written in 1751, to Cadwallader Colden, an American friend, he wrote the following: "There are no bounds (but what expense and labor give) to the force man may raise and use in the electrical way. . . . The greatest known effects of common lightning may, I think, without much difficulty be exceeded in this way, which a few years since could not have been believed. . . ."

One of the obvious problems faced by the 13 colonies and then the new United States in Franklin's day was *under*population. There were far too few people, even in the coastal area of the original colonies, to accomplish the task of making the wilderness habitable. This was not merely a question of cutting down trees and planting grains, building iron works, and so on, but of creating the proper circumstances in which culture would flourish.

At first sight, 1994 America would be impressive to Franklin—for its technology, and also the extent of the nation—but imagine his shocked displeasure as he came up against the cultural degradation. Most of all, he would be astounded that people now believe the world to be overpopulated. For Franklin the desirability of creating conditions in which an *expanding* population would flourish was axiomatic.

This was one of the major points of controversy between the colonies and the British precursors

of Parson Malthus, who wished to artificially restrict industrial development in North America, and thus put a cap on what is now named as its *carrying capacity*. Appealing to the enemies of this outlook in England, Franklin wrote a pamphlet on "Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, etc.," in which he argued the benefits of doubling the population every 20 or 25 years. He wrote: "What an accession of power to the British Empire by sea as well as land."

In his day as in ours, the British were noted for their racism. Franklin satirizes this with rapier-like humor, while arguing for an end to British restraints on the development of American industry. A little further on in the essay, we find these words:

"All Africa is black or tawny; Asia chiefly tawny; America (exclusive of the newcomers) wholly so. And in Europe, the Spaniards, Italians, French, Russians and Swedes are generally of what we call a swarthy complexion; as are the Germans also, the Saxons only excepted, who with the English, make the principal body of white people on the face of the earth. . . . And while we are, as I may call it, scouring our planet by clearing America of woods and so making this side of our globe reflect a brighter light to the eyes of inhabitants in Mars or Venus, why should we, in the sight of superior beings darken its people. . . ."

He concludes with a humorous attack upon slavery, again mocking British racism: "Why increase the sons of Africa by planting them in America, where we have so fair an opportunity, by excluding all blacks and tawnys, of increasing the lovely white and red? But perhaps I am partial to the complexion of my country, for such kind of partiality is natural to mankind."

Benjamin Franklin foresaw that America could be a great nation and his vision was like that of his collaborator Tom Paine, of "a beacon of hope and a temple of liberty" for mankind. Sad to say, most Americans have lost track of what that means. Imagine Ben's shame were he to learn that his America is now endorsing the same policies against population growth which he dedicated his entire life to fighting.