

Benjamin Franklin Was No 'Practical Man'

by Nancy Spannaus

Benjamin Franklin

by Edmund S. Morgan

New Haven and London: Yale University Press,
2002

340 pp., hardcover, \$24.95

Benjamin Franklin, an American Life

by Walter Isaacson

New York, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003

590 pp., hardcover, \$30.00

Writing to a friend in 1753, Benjamin Franklin encapsulated his view of his life's mission: "The faith you mention has doubtless its use in the world. I do not desire to see it diminished, nor would I endeavor to lessen it in any man. But I wish it were more productive of good works than I have generally seen it: I mean real good works, works of kindness, charity, mercy, and public spirit; not holiday-keeping, sermon-reading or hearing, performing church ceremonies, or making long prayers, filled with flatteries and compliments, despised even by wise men, and much less capable of pleasing the Deity. The worship of God is a duty; the hearing and reading of sermons may be useful; but, if men rest in hearing and praying, as too many do, it is as if a tree should value itself on being watered and putting forth leaves, though it never produced any fruit.

"Your great Master thought much less of these outward appearances and professions than many of his modern disciples. He preferred the *doers* of the word, to the mere *hearers*;

the son that seemingly refused to obey the father and yet performed his commands, to him that professed his readiness, but neglected the work; the heretical but charitable Samaritans, to the uncharitable though orthodox priest and sanctified Levite; and those who gave food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, raiment to the naked, entertainment to the stranger, and relief to the sick, though they never heard of his name, he declares shall in the last day be accepted, when those who cry Lord! Lord! who value themselves on their faith, though great enough to perform miracles, but have neglected good works, shall be rejected."

In this statement, and many, many others, the unique individual who played the central, decisive role in founding the American republic, declared his passion to be *doing Good*, not just for his friends, and his family, and his countrymen, but for all mankind. Specifically, Franklin carried out this mission by working with a network of like-minded republicans, internationally, in order to out-fox the world's imperial powers, and establish the world's first Constitutional republic, the United States.

Franklin's legacy remains with us in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, even as the Leibnizian intent of those documents continues under mortal attack, by those who would still destroy the American experiment.

Thus, how is it possible that, in the two major biographies of Franklin published over the last two years by two of the most prominent American authors, this core conception is lost?

It is a popular axiom today, that no one with "great ideas" and a passionate commitment to uplift all humanity, can be "politically successful." That's left for the "practical man," the compromiser, the manipulator. Yet, Franklin was successful precisely because he was part of an international network of great intellectuals and political leaders who were



Though the two new biographies are different, each fails the essential test: To present our Ben Franklin (left) as the heir and next equal of the great Gottfried Leibniz (right), philosopher of “the wisdom of doing Good” who developed the idea of “the pursuit of happiness” the Founding Fathers believed in. No portrayal of Franklin as the great “practical man,” no matter how sympathetic, can avoid being false to the history of the American republic.

pursuing a grand mission, and whose every particular little project was determined by that mission. The result of this project of grand strategy was a new kind of government, which demands of its citizens a certain kind of commitment to continue that mission. Franklin was the embodiment of that kind of mission, like Lincoln after him. If our citizens are separated from knowing his mind, they will be unable to save our republic.

It is this axiom to which Edmund Morgan and Walter Isaacson both succumb, and pander. It’s not that they are unfamiliar with Franklin’s philosophical commitment to doing good. Isaacson even includes the crucial evidence that Franklin looked to the influence of Puritan leader Cotton Mather in his approach to public affairs. Yet, both authors choose to chop Franklin down to a size they think that the modern population would accept: presenting him as a pragmatic operator, although a genius in science and organization, rather than as the crucial, brilliant organizer of the unique institution which is our republic.

Graham Lowry’s Work

This diminishment of Franklin is all the more outrageous, since it comes in the wake of ground-breaking work on this founding father by the late noted historian and LaRouche associate H. Graham Lowry, in his 1988 book *How the Nation Was Won*. In that book, Lowry states that he “documents that Franklin was Cotton Mather’s own protégé, and the son of one of Mather’s leading republican organizers in Boston. The evidence for an hypothesis of continuity [from the Massachusetts Bay colony to the Revolution—ed.] is irrefutable. The proof lies in determining the singularities which account for

the fact, that the *idea* of a continental republic was transformed into a concrete prospect, *before* America’s direct challenges to British authority during the 1760s.”

And uncover the singularities, Lowry did. Contrary to the standard story that Franklin rejected his Puritan past, and modelled himself on the Enlightenment, Lowry shows how Franklin was deployed by Mather; linked up with other collaborators of the Leibnizian faction in England; and then worked in Philadelphia as the “crucial link between the in-depth republican citizenry of New England, and the strategically-placed republican elite fostered by Spotswood in Virginia.”

Lowry stresses that there are, in fact, significant difficulties in putting together the story, difficulties created by the fact that Franklin and others were engaged in mortal combat with the British Empire, and often were forced to rely on subterfuge to accomplish their aims. To the long list of Franklin’s accomplishments, Lowry would add “counterintelligence,” a skill which he painstakingly details in terms of Franklin’s early-life activities in Boston, Philadelphia, and London.

Walter Isaacson told this author that he was familiar with Lowry’s book, and found it “interesting.” Yet this did not prevent him from coming to the outrageous conclusion that “Franklin represents one strand [of the American character—ed.]: the side of pragmatism versus romanticism, of practical benevolence versus moral crusading.” Isaacson specifically declares that Franklin is on the “other side” from the Mathers, and is primarily an exemplar of “middle-class virtues.” (p. 476)

Whatever other positive remarks Isaacson makes in his book—and there are some—this outright lie is outstandingly

destructive, particularly at the present time. There is nothing more crucial for the American population today, than to understand the crucial mission embodied in the fight for the American Republic, as it began in the Massachusetts Bay colony, and continued in the other colonies, and as it was supported by republican factions internationally. This mission involved establishing a form of government which was totally sovereign, and committed to serving the general welfare of the present population and its posterity, by fostering the improvement of man's power to do good. The mission was the antithesis of that of a little, practical man—just as the United States' mission is today—and any presentation of Franklin that presents that image, must be attacked. Franklin was a universal man, with a crucial international historical role to play, just as Lyndon LaRouche is today.

'Reluctant Revolutionary?'

Edmund Morgan's short biography of Franklin begins by seeking to convey his character as an individual motivated by scientific curiosity, and a commitment to *charity* as the generating principle of his life. Morgan understands, as many readers of *Poor Richard's Almanac* do not, that Franklin was not the preacher of frugality that his "penny saved is a penny earned" aphorism is used to convey. In the early sections of the book, Morgan stresses Franklin's devotion to public service, his attempts to lay out a plan for personal moral improvement, and his success at organizing others to act for the benefit of society.

But, Morgan's is a Franklin divorced from his own history! The larger ideas which he imbibed in Boston, from his collaboration with the Mathers and their republican faction, and which sent him to Philadelphia in the first place, are nowhere to be found.

Worse yet, Morgan then proceeds to develop his thesis that Franklin was not *really* interested in establishing an American republic, but just wanted to promote American equality within an "Anglo-American Empire." The particular battle which Morgan uses to support this idea, is Franklin's fight against the Penns, the proprietors of Pennsylvania, who were indeed seeking to treat the colony as a plantation. In this fight, Franklin appealed to the King, in hopes of getting rights from the Crown which were being denied by the Penns and their operatives.

This tactic, of course, does not make Franklin an advocate of the British monarchy's continued rule over America, and it serves to obscure for the reader the fundamental republican commitments of Franklin, which made him such a formidable antagonist for the British oligarchy (as Morgan admits) during the later battles. But, to understand Franklin's approach, Morgan would have to proceed from the standpoint that he was the leader of an international conspiracy to *create* the republic, on a level of ideas and strategy much above the day-to-day maneuvering. Instead, he pulls Franklin down into being a "man of contradictions" and a "reluctant revolutionary," thereby obfuscating our history.

Representative of the 'Middle Class'?

Walter Isaacson's treatment of Franklin pays much more attention to his ideas, and his intellectual allies. All the more egregious, then, that he chooses to define Franklin as the epitome of the "middle class" American, the small business man, the "joiner." And this is despite the fact that Isaacson presents the evidence of Franklin's acknowledged debt to Cotton Mather, whose *Essays to Do Good, or Bonifacius*, Franklin called the most influential book in his life.

Isaacson is definitely proceeding from his own political agenda, which is not entirely a bad one. As he stressed in a lecture which he gave at the Women's Democratic Club in Washington, D.C. in early November 2003, when the Clash of Civilizations unleashed by the Iraq War was raging internationally, he sees Franklin as the antithesis of everything which the Bush Administration stands for, and seeks to present Franklin as an alternative model, particularly in terms of religious tolerance.

Yet, Franklin was only successful in creating this kind of collaboration among different groups because of his deep philosophical commitment to the principles of the republic, to truth, and to collaboration with an international network determined to fight for these principles with him. Small-mindedness simply will not work today, nor did it work for Franklin.

Isaacson's diminishment of Franklin's philosophical depth is systematic. Take, for example, Isaacson's presentation of the Junto, the discussion group of 12 young men from different trades which Franklin founded in 1727 (at the time Franklin was only 21 years old). Isaacson calls this action "typically American," in the sense of Americans being joiners and social activists. But Franklin here is not "joining" an institution; he's *creating* one. And this is not your typical drinking club!

Isaacson admits, without indicating the importance of the fact, that Franklin's Junto had a series of rules and practices which were taken directly from the similar societies established by his patron Cotton Mather and Mather's collaborator Daniel Defoe a generation earlier. He includes in his discussion of the Junto, 20 of the 24 questions which Franklin specified be part of the discussions in Junto meetings, some of which omissions are telling.

For example, the first question asked of Junto members was: "1. Have you met with any thing in the author you last read, remarkable, or suitable to be communicated to the Junto? particularly in history, morality, poetry, phisic, travels, mechanic arts, or other parts of knowledge."¹ But Isaacson leaves out the listing of subjects, which shows this was not simply a low-level discussion. Question number 11 was: "do you think of any thing at present, in which the Junto may be serviceable to *mankind*? to their country, to their friends, or to themselves?" This question, Isaacson leaves out altogether.

1. *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959); Vol. 1, p. 257.

He does, however, leave in questions 14 and 15: “Have you lately observed any defect in the laws of your country of which it would be proper to move the legislature for an amendment? Have you lately observed any encroachments on the just liberties of the people?”

There are other aspects of this “club” which distinguish it from the kind of “middle class” mediocrity which Isaacson imputes to it. There were four additional qualifications which members had to adhere to, which read as follows:

“1. Have you any particular disrespect to any present members?

“2. Do you sincerely declare that you love mankind in general; of what profession or religion soever?

“3. Do you think any person ought to be harmed in his body, name or good, for mere speculative opinions, or his external way of worship?

“4. Do you love *truth for truth’s sake*, and will you endeavour impartially to find and receive it yourself and communicate it to others?” (emphasis added)

In all these cases, members were expected to answer yes, in order to participate.

Isaacson may wish to believe that the Junto’s philosophy is that of the local Rotary Club today, but that’s absurd. The vast qualitative difference was played out in history. Franklin’s friends in the Junto served as the core of his efforts to establish in Philadelphia a whole series of institutions dedicated to the general welfare—library, waterworks, police, etc.—and its founding was followed by his establishment of the American Philosophical Society in the early 1740s, which served as the means of creating the network of revolutionaries which eventually defeated the British. Later came Franklin’s strategic deployment to win international support for American independence, and for a successful unification of the colonies into the Continental Army and the Constitutional republic, all of which saw a crucial role played by Franklin’s leadership, either up front or behind the scenes.

The Battle for the Common Good

As Lowry documents, Benjamin Franklin devoted his attention from adolescence on, to the question of how to “do Good” for his fellow man, a course which required defeating the British oligarchy. Not only did Franklin receive tutelage from the republican faction of New England—the Mathers and his father, who were during his youth an embattled minority in Massachusetts—but he was directed into collaboration with other Leibnizian republicans—Governor Keith of Pennsylvania, former Governor Spotswood of Virginia, and Governor Burnet of New York—in his battle to realize the Massachusetts’ Founders’ vision of a continental republic.

Lowry describes a memorandum Franklin wrote in 1731—a paper he carried with him until 1784—which outlined his political course of action. Franklin attacked political parties, and noted that “few men in public affairs act from a mere view of the good of the country,” and “fewer still . . . act with a view to the good of mankind.”

But Franklin was determined to correct this problem. He wrote: “There seems to me at present to be great occasion for raising a united party for virtue, by forming the virtuous and good men of all nations into a regular body, to be governed by suitable good and wise rules, which good and wise men may probably be more unanimous in their obedience to, than common people are to common laws.

“I at present think that whoever attempts this aright and is well qualified, cannot fail of pleasing God and of meeting with success.”

Clearly Franklin himself made the attempt, with all of his being, putting his life on the line for the benefit of future generations. His commitment came at the very beginning of his career, but there is no time in which it was not being pursued. In 1737 Spotswood appointed Franklin postmaster of Philadelphia, greatly aiding his ability to coordinate revolutionary activity. In the 1740s, Franklin left the publishing business per se, to get involved in scientific experimentation, in cooperation with a Leibnizian network internationally. Ultimately this interest took him to Hanover in Germany, where, in 1766, he met and discussed with the individual who brought about the publication of Leibniz’s heretofore suppressed rejoinder to John Locke, *New Essays on Human Understanding*. Franklin’s scientific work had already been known at German universities, and he went on to Göttingen, where he also had substantial discussions with Leibniz’ intellectual heir Abraham Kästner.

What does this have to do with Franklin’s political activity? Everything. Franklin returned from his continental travels to coordinate the escalating battle for independence, for which he was the point man in London, and ultimately in Philadelphia as well, where he was the senior man on the committee drafting the Declaration of Independence.

Throughout this entire period, 1757-1775, Franklin spent the bulk of his time in Europe, recruiting a network of collaborators who would either come to America to aid in the Revolution, or influence the policies in their own countries in that direction. The process continued even more intensively after Franklin’s return to France, and his stay there from 1776-1785. Internationally, and nationally, he and his collaborators built a “youth movement” which won that Revolution, and instituted a republican Constitution based on those Leibnizian principles, which in fact Mather and his circles shared.

What resulted is that “united party for virtue,” including “good and virtuous men of all nations,” who are passionately determined to establish a republic which can serve as a model and an aid to the entire world. What Franklin’s life shows is that such a commitment, drawing on the philosophical tradition which has promoted the common good, against all lower conceptions of man as a warring beast, can be successful against evil.

That this conclusion goes against every modern axiom of politics, should tell us something about how insane those axioms of today are.