

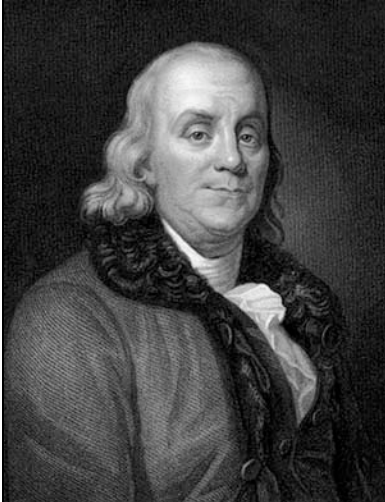
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

By Arnold Petersen



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By ARNOLD PETERSEN

(*Weekly People*, January 14, 1939)

FOREWORD

ARNOLD Petersen, former National Secretary of the Socialist Labor Party, wrote the following essay on Benjamin Franklin for the *Weekly People* of Jan. 14, 1939. We reproduce it here to mark the 300th anniversary of Franklin's birth, on Jan. 17, 1706.

It is the fashion with many academics today to denigrate the founders of the republic, to dwell on their human weaknesses and to detect "hypocrisy" in their proclamations for "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" while tolerating or profiting from human slavery. While expatiating on the shortcomings of the founders, however, many of these same academics are fully aware of the horrors perpetrated by the capitalist system and its wage slavery. Yet, they abstain from the struggle to rid humanity of the evil for fear of losing their positions, of having to defend themselves against the disfavor of their peers, or other excuses that turn their pointing fingers back on themselves.

Whatever one might say about the shortcomings and failures of a Washington, Jefferson, Madison or Franklin, they were men who stood up to the tasks that history carved out for them, though they knew they could not accomplish them all and might fail at what they attempted. Their detractors have less to excuse themselves from today's struggle, not only because the science of socialism has exposed the evil source of today's social problems, but because it points the way out. Socialism provides a better guide for our generation than the simple moral precepts with which—and often against which—people struggled two and three hundred years ago.

Introduction

If we looked upon men and women for what they failed to do at specific junctures in history, rather than what they managed to accomplish in their time and their surroundings, there would be nothing to admire, to aspire to or to strive after.

Benjamin Franklin truly was a great man whose agile, inquisitive and inventive mind added immeasurably to the storehouse of human knowledge and progress. He did not overcome all of the obstacles that his social surroundings placed in his path, but together with the other outstanding personalities of those revolutionary days, he helped to build a nation and lay the foundations of a system—capitalism—that was progressive and revolutionary in its time. Franklin and his compeers moved society a necessary step farther on the path toward the full realization of what he and his generation could not achieve, but which they brought within the grasp of our own generation. Their detractors will never do as much.

ROBERT BILLS

December 4, 2005

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

BY ARNOLD PETERSEN

“Eripuit caelo fulmen, sceptrumque tyrannis.”—*Turgot*.
 (“He snatched the thunderbolt from heaven, the sceptre from tyrants.”)

I.

THERE are those who delight in spinning, endlessly, fine webs on the theme: Does the great man create his age, his environment, or is he the product of his age and environment? Without going over the long and tedious arguments of those who hold to the “great man” theory, it may be generally agreed that however much men may and do influence their age, they are basically conditioned by it, and by material circumstances; that to the great man material conditions of his age are what the springtime and sun and rain are to the seed. Both, in the fulness of time, respond to the urge of the attendant circumstances; and both respond precisely in the degree, and largely in the manner, that circumstances are compelling.

There have, of course, been great men in all ages. Indeed, antiquity has produced men greater—or certainly as great—intellectual “timber” as those who (a thousand or more years later) rose to greatness, and became the instruments of much greater and more important progress in their times, in entirely different, and far more difficult, settings than was the case with those of ancient times. It is senseless, however, to say that if only such-and-such a great personality had arisen a thousand years before, society might have been spared the delay in progress, and mankind the travail and agony of that “delay,” if we had only had a Plato, a Socrates, an Aristotle, to guide and inspire that later age. For the wisest men, in the winter of social dormancy, can do no more to effect the bloom and fruition of social seeds, than in winter’s cold the most ardent wishes can bring about the bloom and fruition in nature. But as in nature so in society, the ripeness of the season produces the response to the irresistible urge toward the unfolding from within that we

observe in social as well as biological evolution.

When, therefore, we say that a great man symbolized and logically expressed and fully served his age we do no more than express the thought that a certain material and economic stage had been reached which brought with it a train of superstructural¹ problems which, with the basic economic problems, demanded solution—a stage to which there had to be brought to bear a process of rationalization requiring an intellect of a certain propensity—an intellect of high order endowed with faculties so all-embracing that it at one and the same time summed up the *present* and envisioned the *future*—the future, that is, in logical sequence to the present. That this intellect happened to be *this* particular human being was, of course, more or less an accident. For had the particular individual not responded, some other, equally great, intellect would have appeared—then, or perhaps a little later, but surely within the period calling for the “right man” to serve the “right time.” Thus, while the conditions do produce “the man,” the advent of “the man” may obviously be hastened or delayed, though in a manner or degree that is of no “great pith and moment” to the process of social evolution in a given economic period, however much the fate of millions of individuals may momentarily be affected one way or the other.

II.

Viewing the life of Benjamin Franklin, truly one of the greatest Americans, we realize readily how typical he was of his age and country, and yet how far ahead of them he was in many important respects. Had he been born, say, in Germany, he might have become another Goethe—at least another Goethe, the scientist and original thinker. This is no fantastic speculation if we briefly consider the life and activities of these two outstanding geniuses who were both born in that amazing

¹ [This, of course, is a Marxist allusion, which may best be explained by citing the following passage from Frederick Engels' *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*:

“The new facts made imperative a new examination of all past history. Then it was seen that *all* past history, with the exception of its primitive stages, was the history of class struggles; that these warring classes of society are always the products of the modes of production and of exchange—in a word, of the *economic* conditions of their time; that the economic structure of society always furnishes the real basis, starting from which we can alone work out the ultimate explanation of the whole superstructure of juridical and political institutions as well as of the religious, philosophical, and other ideas of a given historical period. Hegel has freed history from metaphysics—he made it dialectic; but his conception of history was essentially idealistic. But now idealism was driven from its last refuge, the philosophy of history; now a materialistic treatment of history was propounded, and a method found of explaining man's ‘knowing’ by his ‘being,’ instead of, as heretofore, his ‘being’ by his ‘knowing.’”—R.B.]

eighteenth century. Both were inventors and discoverers; both were original thinkers; both were possessed of a vitality which overflowed the restricted limitations imposed by their society and times. And even as both were great, so both were prone to the identical weaknesses. In short, except for the fact that Goethe was also a great poet (which Franklin definitely was not!), these two towering eighteenth century intellects were strikingly alike in their basic qualities and in their essential characteristics. Yet, how different in details and in actual performance—a difference produced, of course, by the fact that one was born in a decadent feudal society, and the other in a new, growing social system which knew little of actual feudal practices.

The greatness of Franklin cannot simply be measured on the yardstick of the absolute, it must be measured also in relation to the almost primitive conditions into which he was born. For early eighteenth century America was primitive, in thought as well as action. As the historian McMaster said: “The story of the life of Benjamin Franklin begins at a time when Queen Anne still ruled the colonies; when the colonies were but ten in number, and when the population of the ten did not sum up to four hundred thousand souls; at a time when witches were plentiful in New England; when foxes troubled the farmers of Lynn; when wolves and panthers abounded in Connecticut; when pirates infested the Atlantic coast; when there was no such thing as a stage-coach in the land; when there were but three colleges and one newspaper in the whole of British North America; when no printing press existed north of Philadelphia; when New York was still defended by a high stockade; and when Ann Pollard, the first white woman that ever set foot on the soil of Boston, was still enjoying hale old age.”

The formal schooling of Franklin was brief and limited—two years of study of reading, writing and arithmetic, in the last of which he failed! As for the rest, he was essentially a self-taught man, acquiring his style, and taste for books, through those good old standbys—Plutarch’s *Lives*, Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the Bible, writings by Defoe and Mather, but, above all, through reading assiduously Addison and Steele’s *The Spectator*. And later still he came upon Locke’s essay, “Human Understanding,” which gave his philosophical thinking a definite direction. But being unencumbered with the reading of the multitude of superficial, and mostly worthless, newspapers, magazines, etc., which steal the time, and cram the minds of the inquiring youngsters of today, and being, above all, what the Germans would call “ein geistliches Urmensch,” i.e., a person endowed with original thought and

extraordinary mental powers, he needed little more to fertilize his mind, and he soon began to produce literature which in time was to constitute classical American writing. It has been said of Franklin, disparagingly, that he really was not a man of letters, that he cannot be bracketed with such names in American literature as Irving, Poe, Emerson, etc. That is pure nonsense. To be sure, the greater part of Franklin's writings consists of essays, polemic writings, state papers, not to mention his numerous letters—in fact, he was one of the greatest pamphleteers of all time. But to say that his racy, wise and varied literary productions are not literature is to place limitations on the meaning of the term "literature," wholly arbitrary and absurd. In American literature Franklin was as much of a pioneer as he was in economics, in physics, in politics, and in the science of government as distinguished from politics pure and simple. To those who might say: "What good are Franklin's works as literature," we might give the answer Franklin himself once gave to one who scoffed at the balloon: "What," said this unenlightened skeptic, "is the use of a balloon?" Said Franklin: "What is the use of a new-born baby?"

III.

So backward was the intellectual life in the colonies, that to possess "a trunk full of books" was to be marked out for very special distinction. When only 18 years old Franklin was reported to have such a "trunk full of books," and, as an earlier American historian observes, "so large a cargo of an article so rare excited surprise." It did so to such an extent that Governor Burnet of New York invited the lad to visit him and had a long talk with him. As our historian put it: "This incident is valuable as showing the utter simplicity [!] of life in the colonial seaport, where books and men who read them were so few that the King's representative was glad to hold an hour's literary conversation with a printer's boy."

In the popular mind Franklin's name is held synonymous with thrift, and with the traits generally possessed by, or attributed to, the petty bourgeoisie. That Franklin at one period in his life was thrifty, and all that is associated with thrift, is undoubtedly true. But he was far from being the virtuous, homely, thrifty husbandman that many reports made him out to be, and which some of his writings would seem to indicate, and if the numerous banks now bearing his name were made to publicize what he practiced, rather than what he preached, such publicizing would constitute anything but arguments in favor of patronizing the particular bank, or any bank for that matter! However, Colonial America of

necessity imposed upon the average person the need of expending sparingly one's income, or limited savings. Again, when Franklin preached moderation in eating and drinking, or morality, such as was prevalent at his time, or when he stressed the supposed value of continence, etc., he was far from lending personal example to his own precepts. For, despite his outward simplicity, despite his seeming moderation, he was essentially a man of the world—with a hearty zest for living, shrewd and calculating when he had need of being so, cautious when occasion required it, but he was, indeed, no Yahoo! Woodrow Wilson said of him that he was half peasant and half man of the world. That is scarcely correct. Franklin was no Cincinnatus who returned to his plough after heroic or political conquests. Franklin lived in a transition period, and, as so many other great men of such periods, shared to some extent the characteristics of both the old and the new era. At times he was certainly a perfect specimen of the *petit bourgeoisie*—but not for long. The thinker, the student, the philosopher, the inventor, statesman and practical man of affairs, were ever predominant, whatever may have been the frequency of petty bourgeois “lapses.” His *Poor Richard's Almanac* is a veritable anthology of the wisdom of all the ages, including, as said, a goodly collection of the homilies proper to a rather primitive bourgeois society. Among the shrewder sayings we note these:

“If you ride a horse, sit close and tight,
“If you ride a man, sit easy and light.”

The more enlightened plutocrats of today (including the politicians who would reform capitalism) realize the wisdom of not “riding” present-day wage slaves too hard! And in line with that is the following:

“Would you persuade, speak of interest, not of reason.”

Wise old fellow!

And these:

“The ancients tell us what is best; but we must learn what is fittest.”

“Wish not to live long as to live well.”

Franklin lived both long and well!

“He does not possess wealth—it possesses him.”

We need but to look around us in this predatory capitalist society, where plutocrats and their lackeys stand chained to the wealth of which they have despoiled the workers, to realize how true and wise is that maxim!

Though exceedingly fond of the ladies, he could lash out at the fair sex generally—as for instance:

“Is’t not enough plagues, wars, and famine, rise to lash our crimes, but must our wives be wise?”!

And the talkative old spinster gets this epitaph:

“Beneath this stone is laid,

“A noisy antiquated maid,

“Who, from her cradle talk’d till death,

“And ne’er before was out of breath.

“Whither she’s gone we cannot tell;

“For, if she talks not, she’s in Hell:

“If she’s in Heaven, she’s there unblest

“Because she hates a place of rest”!

As said, Franklin was not the kind to be hampered by his own sermons. Let us note this “noble” precept, for instance:

“Be temperate in wine, in eating, girls, and sloth, or the gout will seize you and plague you both.”

In old age Franklin suffered agonies from the gout—he even wrote a piece, which sardonically he entitled, “Dialogue Between Franklin and the Gout”!

IV.

His active mind was forever occupied with speculations on making life less laborious. An anecdote told of him as a child is revealing, although it is quite possible that the anecdote was invented by a later-day {latter-day?} admirer of Franklin in order to illustrate his hero’s natural-born propensity for devising means and methods of saving time and labor. The story goes that little Benjamin Franklin found the long graces said by his father before and after meals very tedious. One day, after the winter’s provisions had been salted, he said: “I think, father, if you were to say *grace* over the whole cask once for all, it would be a vast saving of time.”

Truth or legend, the story does illustrate the eminently practical side of Franklin. However, his inventions were numerous, his experimentations endless.

There was scarcely a mechanical difficulty or toilsome effort which he did not attempt to solve or eliminate. His invention of the lightning-rod won him wide acclaim. Among others, Robespierre wrote him a commendatory letter after he, as a rather obscure lawyer, had defended a case involving the installing of the lightning-rod, the use of which had been prohibited by the authorities in a French town. Other inventions and experiments of his included the “Franklin stove,” the kite experiment, the so-called Ferguson Clock, and innumerable gadgets for his own personal use which stimulated inventions generally. He wrote many papers on a diversity of subjects that attest the versatility of his genius, including one on “The cause and cure of smoking chimneys,” another on curing smoking street lamps; several on various instruments and simplifications in navigation, among which we note water-tight compartments, floating anchors for use at sea in storms, dishes that would stay placed in a turbulent sea, and he toyed repeatedly with the use of oil in calming rough waters, etc., etc. Very early he organized the extinguishing of fires in a manner that suggests amazingly modern fire prevention. The recording of his inventions and various proposals for improving methods of doing things in general would make a long list—too long even to permit of an adequate summary in this limited space. But although at times he bitterly complained of the ridicule to which he was subjected by the ignorant mob (a circumstance which frequently prompted him to pursue his experimentation in stealth), he had the satisfaction of winning recognition in the contemporary world of science (even medical science). As early as 1752 he was awarded the Copley medal of the Royal Society of London, which earlier had ridiculed his theory of lightning, and in 1777 he was elected a member of the Royal Medical Society of Paris, and an honorary member of the Medical Society of London in 1787. These medical distinctions, however, did not prevent him from poking fun at the doctors of medicine. While still in Paris, in 1784, he observed:

“There are in every great city a number of persons who are never in health because they are fond of medicines and always taking them, whereby they derange the natural functions and hurt their constitutions. If these people can be persuaded to forbear their drugs in expectation of being cured by only the physician’s finger or an iron rod pointing at them [a la Mesmer!] *they may possibly find good effects through they mistake the cause*”!

In the field of political economy and sociology, Franklin’s discoveries were even more original and important than in the others. While a mere youth he gave

expression to a thought which prompted Karl Marx to refer to Franklin as “the celebrated Franklin,” as one who, after William Petty, was “one of the first economists . . . who saw through the nature of value.”² To the Marxian Socialist it is a matter of extreme satisfaction to be able to cite America’s greatest all-around genius—certainly one of the greatest—against the vulgar contentions of the exploiting class which today holds in subjection the country’s only useful class, the wage workers. In his pamphlet, [*A Modest Enquiry into the Nature and Necessity of a Paper Currency*](#), Benjamin Franklin wrote:

“There is a certain quantity of money needed to carry on trade. More than this sum can be productive of no real use. Less than this quantity is always productive of serious evils.* . . . [Money] is a medium of exchange; and whatever men agree to make the medium is, to those who have it, the very things they want, because it will buy for them the very things they want. It is cloth to him who wants cloth. It is corn to him who wants corn. Custom has made gold and silver the materials for this medium of exchange. *But the measure of value for this medium is not gold and silver, but labor.* Labor is as much a measure of the value of silver as of anything else. Suppose one man employed to raise corn, while another man is busy refining gold [?]. At the end of a year the complete produce of corn and the complete produce of silver [gold?] are the natural price of each other. If the one be twenty bushels and the other twenty ounces, then one ounce of silver [?] is worth the labor of raising one bushel of corn. *Money, therefore, as bullion, is valuable by so much labor as it costs to produce that bullion.*”

This, indeed, is remarkably clear language, and sound doctrine, and revolutionary withal—and especially revolutionary in its effect in our day. For when Franklin uttered it, he was unhampered by any restrictions now imposed by the necessities of a class which fears that labor would get revolutionary ideas into their heads. But in Franklin’s day there was no such revolutionary class as the working class. Hence, such subjects as value, the true nature and measure of it, could be

² [The celebrated Franklin, one of the first economists, after Wm. Petty, who saw through the nature of value, says: “Trade in general being nothing else but the exchange of labour for labour, the value of all things is . . . most justly measured by labour.” (“The works of B. Franklin, &c.,” edited by Sparks. Boston, 1836, Vol. II., p. 267.) Franklin is unconscious that by estimating the value of everything in labour, he makes abstraction from any difference in the sorts of labour exchanged, and thus reduces them all to equal human labour. But although ignorant of this, yet he says it. He speaks first of “the one labour,” then of “the other labour,” and finally of “labour,” without further qualification, as the substance of the value of everything. (Karl Marx, *Capital.*)—R.B.]

* Compare William Petty: “Money is but the fat of the Body Politick, whereof too much doth as often hinder its agility, as too little makes it sick. . . .”!

discussed freely and honestly. There were neither college professors, hired capitalist editors, nor “red”-baiting politicians at hand to denounce Franklin as a “Socialist,” or as a tool of whatever might have been the contemporary equivalent of “Moscow”!

Again, on the subject of private property Franklin spoke with amazing clarity, and in a manner that likewise would have called down upon his head the denunciations of the quavering professors, the sleazily insinuating editors, and “public relations counsels,” and the howling, medieval clerical propagators of falsehoods. Always strongly opposed to discrimination against the poor and propertyless, especially as regards the suffrage, he bitterly denounced the attempt to make the possession of property the condition for the exercise of the franchise. The story told by De Leon (unverified, but undoubtedly authentic) illustrates the point. As De Leon told the story:

Somebody wanted a property qualification. “Benjamin Franklin asked: ‘Suppose a man comes and wants to enroll. You ask him: “What is your name?” “John Jones.” “Have you any property?” “Yes, I have a donkey.” “How much is your donkey worth?” “Five pounds.” “Very well, you can vote.” Next year the same man comes around and he wants to register. You ask him: “Have you any property?” “No.” “What has become of your donkey?” “He is dead.” “Well, then, you can’t vote!” ‘Now,’ says Franklin, ‘who voted last year, the man or the donkey?’”

In 1789, in Franklin’s 84th year, the proposal was made to amend the Constitution of the State of Pennsylvania by which the upper house (Franklin, by the by, had opposed the reactionary bicameral legislature) would be elected by the property-holding class only—that is, a minority of the population—yet exercising equal power with the lower house, elected by the majority. Franklin exclaimed:

“Why should the upper house, chosen by a minority, have equal power with the lower chosen by a majority? Is it supposed that wisdom is the necessary concomitant of riches, and that one man worth a thousand pounds must have as much wisdom as twenty who have only 999? And why is property to be represented at all? . . . Private property. . . is a creature of society, and is subject to the calls of that society, *whenever its necessities shall require it, even to its last farthing.*”

And the courageous, noble and great thinker concluded by deploring the tendency among some of his fellow citizens “to commence an aristocracy by giving the rich a predominancy in government.”

As Daniel De Leon said:

“That sentence ‘Property is a creature of society’ is a deep scientific statement, and I would like S. or anybody else to enlighten me as to where that utterance or a similar one happens before Franklin made it. Socialism maintains that very thing, that property is the creature of society; property, mind you, not wealth—property [socialism maintains], that the power of holding, owning, is the creature of society.”³

At the Constitutional Convention (1787) Franklin had previously given expression to similar convictions. On the same question of attaching property qualifications to the ballot, he is reported by Madison as follows:

“Doctor Franklin expressed his dislike of everything that tended to debase the spirit of the common people. If honesty was often the companion of wealth, and if poverty was exposed to peculiar temptations, it was not less true that the possession of property increased the desire of more property. Some of the greatest rogues he was ever acquainted with were the richest rogues.”

As might naturally be expected, Franklin was an ardent opponent of slavery. His enlightened mind revolted against the concept and practice of human slavery; but he also argued against it as disadvantageous, as uneconomical. The first anti-slavery society in America was organized by the Quakers in 1775. It did not thrive, but when it was revived in 1787 Franklin was made the president. He was one of the signers of a memorial addressed to the first United States Congress, petitioning for the abolition of slavery, but the politicians, in true style, “passed the buck,” invoking the already hoary excuse of states’ rights. This so outraged Franklin that he published a supposed account of the deplorable situation prevailing in Algeria in 1687, where “good Christians” had been captured by the pirates and sold into slavery. The satirical hoax goes on to related how one Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim, a member of the “Divan” (diet—i.e., Algerian legislature!), reported on a petition to free the Christian slaves, with the result that the following resolution was adopted by the “Divan”:

“The doctrine that plundering and enslaving the Christians is unjust, is at best problematical; but that it is the interest of this state to continue the practise, is clear; therefore, let the petition be rejected.”⁴

³ [From a debate on the National Platform of the Socialist Labor Party at the Tenth National Convention in June 1900. “S” refers to Herman Simpson, a delegate from New York.—R.B.]

⁴ [“On the Slave Trade.” Letter to the *Federal Gazette*, March 23, 1790. Read the text online at http://www.jmu.edu/madison/center/main_pages/madison_archives/era/african/elite/trade.htm—R.B.]

Thus, satirically and scornfully, Franklin exposed the smug hypocrisy of the pious, Christian slaveholders in America, and laid bare the sordid, material interests which moved heaven and earth to maintain the nefarious institution of slavery, precisely as today the “wage-slaveholders” oppose the emancipation of the working class, justifying wage slavery in the same hypocritical manner, and for the same reasons, of those who opposed the efforts of noble Franklin to remove the foul blot on the young republic’s escutcheon. Three weeks later Franklin was dead. Thus to the very last he fought intensely for human freedom and social progress, dying as nobly as he had lived.

V.

It was David Garrick, the great 18th-century English actor, who said (about the famous preacher, George Whitefield) that he (Whitefield) was so great an orator that he could move an audience to tears and hysteria simply by varying his pronunciation of Mesopotamia! No such orator was Franklin. His speech was simple, direct and logical, and invariably convincing. And when his arguments or actions were met with slander and personal abuse, he could remain cool and silently disdainful. An instance of this we find on the occasion of the debate on a petition for the removal of Governor Hutchinson of Massachusetts, which debate took place at a meeting of the Privy Council in London in 1774. Wedderburn, a lawyer who, as solicitor-general, spoke against the petition, fulminated against Franklin, who was falsely accused by the Tories of having stolen certain letters which compromised Governor Hutchinson. Wedderburn’s attack on Franklin (who was present) was violent vituperative in tone and language, but Franklin remained quiet and dignified, as a result of which he reaped a new crop of admirers and friends, and considerable sympathy for the cause of the colonists. Horace Walpole later wrote these lines on the disgraceful incident:

“Sarcastic Sawney, swollen with spite and prate,
On silent Franklin poured his venal hate;
The calm philosopher, without reply,
Withdrew, and gave his country liberty.”

*

Franklin belongs to the company of the immortals. Yet, for all his greatness, despite his towering genius, and extraordinary personality, he was more human than any among the men of his time and after. He was robust, yet capable of

restraint—fond of good living, of fair ladies, witty companions and learned fellow-savants. He was, in short, a strange combination of diverse personalities, as for instance, of an Icarus, a Plato, a Falstaff. But, unlike Icarus, his wings of invention were not melted by flying too close to the sun; though a teacher and a scholar, he was not a didactic Plato; and though he lived his life richly, fully and with gusto, he escaped the grossness of Falstaff. It is perhaps as much for his purely human, lovable qualities, his essentially (and pardonable) human weaknesses, as for his great contributions to human thought and social progress, that we love him. Though born into a primitive society, essentially a parochial society, he was anything but primitive or parochial. His was a universal, all-embracing mind. Daniel De Leon hails him as being the first to suggest the international brotherhood of man when he (Franklin) suggested that the field of stars on the American flag would eventually be widened to make room for many more stars, these to represent all the peoples and races on earth. Of all the great Americans he is peculiarly of the people—even more so than Lincoln—because he is elemental, of the earth earthy, and we understand him and love him in the same sense that we love the wind, and the rain, and the earth, and all things sweet and natural; all that is fructifying and truly great and imperishable! He represents true progress, he is science and invention incarnate, and, instead of trembling before tyrants, he makes tyrants tremble. Even today, as we witness the made witches' cauldron that we call capitalism, we are reminded of his sage words on war. "A highwayman," he said in 1785, "is as much a robber when he plunders in a gang as when single; and a nation that makes an unjust war is only a great gang." Was Franklin referring to a contemporary Hitler or Mussolini when he made this reference to bandit rulers and gangster nations?

His repudiation of his son William, for the latter's base treason, and unnatural support of usurpation—the British Crown—endears him to us still more, for though it would have been human if Franklin had yielded to sentimental considerations, he could not, and would not, condone betrayal of all that he held dearest and worthwhile in life, even when his first-born was the offender. He could not, would not and did not bow down before the tyrant. One who could and did so could be no son of his! Monarchs and tyranny, he knew would perish. Liberty and humanity would in the end conquer and endure. And in the kingdom of the intellect, of the nobler human spirit, it is the Franklins who rule, while the petty kinglets grovel in the dust!

Benjamin Franklin

“When monarchs tumble to the ground
Successors easily are found;
But, matchless Franklin! What a few
Can hope to rival such as you,
Who seized from kings their sceptered pride,
And turned the lightning’s darts aside!”

—(*Philip Freneau.*)

[THE END.]

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.

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