



## The America Ben Franklin saw

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Nov 22, 2012 01:11 AM EST

The Washington Post Published: November 21

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When he was a young man, Benjamin Franklin wired together a set of batteries he had just invented and used them to shock turkeys slated for a Thanksgiving feast. Thus he added yet another invention to his list: the fried turkey. “The birds killed in this manner eat uncommonly tender,” he wrote.

After election seasons such as the one past, and when facing “fiscal cliffs” like the one looming, it’s therapeutic to gaze back through history’s haze and catch the eye of Franklin, the Founding Father who winks at us. The twinkle behind his bifocals reassures us that things will turn out all right.

Franklin’s optimism about the American experiment is reflected in an essay he wrote about our first Thanksgiving. The early settlers, “their minds gloomy and discontented,” frequently fasted to seek relief from their distress, he recounted. Just when they were about to declare another day of fasting, “a farmer of plain sense” pointed out that “the inconveniences they suffered, and concerning which they had so often wearied heaven with their complaints, were not so great.” Instead of another fast, the farmer argued, they should have a feast to give thanks. Writing a century later — in 1785, a period when both the economy and political system looked fragile, rather like the present — Franklin assured his

fellow citizens that thanksgiving was still warranted. "Let us take a cool view of the general state of our affairs, and perhaps the prospect will appear less gloomy than has been imagined," he wrote.

One of the glories of America is that there are two strands in its national character. One is that of the liberty-loving individualist who flies a flag proclaiming, Don't tread on me. The other is that of the civic-minded citizen who sees our nation's progress as a common endeavor. Tocqueville wrote that these strands were often in conflict, as they seemed to be in many of this year's elections. But Franklin realized that these strands were interwoven and related, part of the warp and woof of the tightly knit American fabric.

Franklin was the first great embodiment of that American archetype: the spunky, self-made Horatio Alger who rises from rags to riches by aspiration and grit, and then dedicates himself to creating a society where others can do the same. He believed that the business of America was not merely to celebrate success but also to ensure that each new generation had the opportunity to achieve it.

**These Rotarian instincts were nurtured in a civic-improvement club that Franklin founded as a young printer in Philadelphia. The Leather Apron Club was composed of enterprising tradesmen, artisans and shopkeepers, what he proudly called "we the middling people." Instead of replicating the rigid hereditary class system of England, America should have as its backbone, Franklin believed, a middle class whose success came from hard work.**

**The Leather Apron Club discussed civic and political issues, devised schemes for self-improvement and formed a network dedicated to "doing well by doing good." Its members helped launch a flotilla of civic associations, including militia and street-sweeping corps, volunteer firefighters, tax-supported neighborhood constables, health and life insurance groups, a library, a hospital, an academy for educating youth, a society for sharing scientific information and a postal system to help connect everyone.**

Franklin believed that civic and military service were enriching. If he were around today, he would probably be encouraging business groups and trade associations to form organizations similar to Teach for America, to allow people the opportunity to be part of legal, financial, health, technology and other service corps.

He also believed that compromisers may not make great heroes but that they do make great democracies. Even he did not always get right the balance between compromise and principle. At the Constitutional Convention, he was willing to go along with the compromises on slavery. But he tried to right himself when he got the balance wrong. At age 81, he became an outspoken advocate of abolition.

Over the years, America has been pretty good at regaining its balance. Albert Einstein fretted deeply about the anti-communist witch hunts of the early 1950s and told friends that America seemed to be on a course similar to Germany's in the 1930s. A few years later, as the frenzy subsided, Einstein discovered what was fundamental about America: It can be swept by waves of seemingly dangerous political passions. But those sentiments pass, absorbed by its democracy and righted by its constitutional

gyroscope. “Somehow they manage to return to normality,” he marveled about Americans in a letter to his son.

Franklin had the vision to see America as made up of rugged individualists who valued their freedom but also cared about the aspirations of others. He would have deeply cared about young people in Trenton or Toledo today struggling to find some opportunity to succeed. In his will, Franklin left the bulk of his wealth to create revolving loan funds so that aspiring young tradesmen and shopkeepers could borrow a little money to get started, then pay it back so that subsequent young entrepreneurs could get a helping hand. These loan funds worked for more than two centuries.

Franklin also understood the beauty of diversity. During his lifetime, he donated to the building fund of every church constructed in Philadelphia. When a hall was being built to accommodate visiting preachers, Franklin urged his fellow citizens to donate “so that even if the Mufti of Constantinople were to send a missionary to preach Mohammedanism to us, he would find a pulpit at his service.” On his deathbed, he made one of the largest donations for the first synagogue built in Philadelphia.

It was that type of America — built on freedom, liberty, opportunity, shared aspirations and diversity — that Franklin and his fellow founders helped create. I suspect he would be confident that we today can still balance those ideals.