



LESSON 10:

Benjamin Franklin: Master Diplomat for One Last Time

OVERVIEW

Franklin returned to America in 1785 and within two years was once again at the center of the effort to define and shape the new nation. In 1787 he was the oldest member of the Constitutional Convention, suffering from poor health and often excruciating 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 pragmatic 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 house to have equal representation, the other to be based on population of the state.

Franklin opposed using landownership as a prerequisite for the right to vote; refused to grant unlimited veto power to the president; and recommended impeachment as a remedy for improper conduct. He believed that the major achievement of the Constitutional Convention was the unification of the states. Although the new Constitution did not have the anti-slavery clause he had hoped for, he signed it nonetheless, "recognizing the greater goal of unity."

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Consider Franklin's role at the Constitutional Convention.
- Examine an oil painting depicting a scene from the Constitutional Convention.
- Study a speech Franklin delivered at the Convention's closing.

TIME

This lesson and activity require two class periods.

MATERIALS

- *The Scene at the Signing of the Constitution*, oil painting by Howard Chandler Christy, 1940. Available at http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/charters_of_freedom_zoom_pages/charters_of_freedom_zoom_6.2.1.html.
- *Speech in the Convention at the Conclusion of its Deliberations*, September 17, 1787. *Franklin Writings*, edited by J.A. Leo Lemay. (New York: The Library of America, 1987). Available at www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/debates/917.htm.

McREL STANDARDS

Civics

Standard 8. Understands the central ideas of American constitutional government and how this form of government has shaped the character of American society

Language Arts

Standard 8. Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes

History/United States History

Standard 8. Understands the institutions and practices of government created during the

Revolution and how these elements were revised between 1787 and 1815 to create the foundation of the American political system based on the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights

Visual Arts

Standard 2. Knows how to use structure (e.g., sensory qualities, organizational principles, expressive features) and functions of art

Standard 3. Knows a range of subject matter, symbols, and a range of ideas in the visual arts

LESSON AND ACTIVITY

1. Either display via overhead projector or distribute copies of *The Scene at the Signing of the Constitution* by Howard Chandler Christy.
2. Ask students to identify the scene and locate Benjamin Franklin in the group (he is seated in the center of the painting).
3. Using the painting's composition as their guide, ask students to theorize about Franklin's role at the Constitutional Convention. Students should consider the following elements:
 - Franklin's location in the painting
 - The amount of light and color with which Franklin is depicted as opposed to other figures
 - Franklin's action in the painting
4. Distribute copies of Franklin's "Speech in the Convention at the Conclusion of its Deliberations" to each student. Explain to students that Franklin had the honor of addressing his fellow delegates at the close of the Convention, and that the document they received is a transcript of that speech. (You may also want to point out that this transcript is a primary source document: it reflects the viewpoint or observations of an event that the writer actually participated in or observed.)
5. Divide the class into groups of three to four students. Explain to students that many historians regard Franklin as a master strategist, whose diplomatic skills included knowing when to exercise restraint, flexibility, or compromise in an effort to bring together opposing visions. Instruct students that as they read through Franklin's speech, they should identify which, if any, of the following characteristics Franklin displayed in his remarks.
 - Compromise
 - Vision
 - Cunning
 - Restraint
6. After groups have completed their reading and discussion, reassemble the class and together address the following questions:
 - Do you think Franklin's speech was effective in persuading his fellow delegates to sign the Constitution? Why or why not?
 - What was the key strategy or negotiating style Franklin exhibited in this speech?

- In what way does the painting presented at the start of the class portray Franklin's role in the convention?
- Why did the artist portray Franklin's role in this way?

7. Ask students to write an essay expressing agreement or disagreement with the following statement by Princeton University scholar Barbara Oberg in her observations of Franklin's closing Convention speech: "A stand for compromise is not the stuff of heroism, virtue, or moral certainty. But it is the essence of the democratic process."

ASSESSMENT

Students are assessed on the quality of their contributions to class discussion and group work and on the extent to which their essays demonstrate thoughtful engagement with the concepts of compromise, diplomacy, and the democratic process. Essays may be evaluated according to an established rubric.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Students examine the speech or writing of one of the delegates who dissented from the Constitution and compare that statement to Franklin's closing speech.
- Students re-enact a day in the life of the Constitutional Convention, recreating some of the key speeches and debates.

FURTHER RESOURCES

- Doren, Carl Van. *The Great Rehearsal: The Story of the Making and Ratifying of the Constitution of the United States*. (New York: The Viking Press, 1948).
- Ellis, Joseph J. *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).
- Wood, Gordon S. *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*. (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004).