The Albany Plan and the Road to Revolution

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Benjamin Franklin has avoided the fate of the other Founding Fathers in that he has not become a target for historians. People like George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, even Robert Morris – the entire starting line-up of the American Revolution – have all become enmeshed in ideological and political conflicts, in their own time and among modern historians. They are presented to us as either saints and geniuses, or as opportunists, power grabbers, racists, etc. Compare, for example, the way John Adams has been represented during previous generations as one of the worst presidents in US history, and how Americans are now told to see him, thanks to David McCullough's hagiographic book and accompanying HBO series.

Franklin is different. Americans do not consider him a saint, and do not fault him for being a man of his time and culture. We do not consider him a giant, like Washington, Jefferson, or Hamilton; on the contrary, we like to think of him as normal and down to earth. His secret to success was his charm – he was a likable and agreeable fellow, unlike many of those other "giants." But Franklin's success as a historical persona is also related to the fact that modern historians see in him a vindication of their opposing interpretations of the Revolution; specifically, on the nature and purpose of the Revolution.

One would think that 250 years after the event, Americans would have a firm understanding of the purpose of the revolt that founded their country, but no. In fact, the lack of such clarity has increased as the stream of books published on the American Revolution has grown generation by generation over the centuries. Something in the traditional narrative of the Revolution still does not make sense to its audience. After all, English settlers in America in the mid-18th century had perhaps the most comfortable living standards and lowest taxation rates in the Western world at the time; their trade was protected by the strongest navy in the history of the world; their borders were protected by the British Empire; and through London, they had access to the largest marketplace in world history. Why would these people, of all people, put all these benefits on the line by taking on the greatest military power in the world? Why would the winners of colonial society – the elites – lead a war to change the status quo? Why would the rich risk their wealth,

lives, and social and political standing over mild tax hikes? And if the rich acted out of economic self-interest, then why did hundreds of thousands of lower-class colonists join them in their fight? If this was a tax revolt, why were Americans so angry about the Tea Act, which eliminated the tax on tea? If Americans opposed monarchy, why were they silent on it throughout the colonial era?

Ever since Thomas Paine published *Common Sense*, many Americans and many American historians have explained the Revolution as Paine had – as a war of national liberation. They claim that over the course of the colonial era, Anglo-American colonists underwent a transformation – a process of Americanization – at the end of which they were no longer conventional Englishmen. They became something different: Americans, a new national group, with uniquely American ideals, values, and sensibilities. The settlers had changed, and they therefore wanted to change their system of government to reflect their current ideas and sensibilities. Thus, the Revolution of 1776 was merely the formal culmination of the "real" revolution – the gradual change in mentality, values and political culture that had taken place in the hearts and minds of Americans during the colonial era.

Other historians – a minority opinion – argue that this was not a war of national liberation. They hold that Americans were not, and did not see themselves as, distinct from other Englishmen; and that they did not see themselves as connected to one another by a bond of nationhood before 1776. These historians hold that the American Revolution was a conservative revolution; a revolution designed not to change the status quo and create a new social and political arrangement, but to *preserve* the status quo. Americans were conventional and backward-looking Englishmen who wanted to resist changes that the British government was introducing to the Empire's system of government, such as new trade restrictions and tax measures, strong enforcement of imperial regulations, undercutting the jurisdiction of local courts, and otherwise expanding the reach of the central government at the expense of local autonomy.

The Albany Congress and Ben Franklin's Plan of Union play an important role in both interpretations of the American Revolution. Both groups of historians claim Franklin and the Albany Plan as evidence that supports their own understanding of the Revolution and its purpose. The Albany Congress convened (in Albany) in the summer of 1754, as the western and northern frontiers were warming up before the official outbreak of the French and Indian War (1755-63). It seated delegates from the middle and northern colonies and from as far south as Maryland to discuss matters of common concern – primarily Indian relations and frontier defense. Ben Franklin, who represented Pennsylvania, proposed his famous Albany Plan (supported by his popular propaganda cartoon) which called for the formation of a supreme governing body over the American colonies. This government would be headed by a "President-General of the United Colonies" and a deliberative representative council composed of delegates from the different colonies. This continental government would deal with matters of common concern, like inter-colonial commerce, Indian relations, common defense, westward expansion and the like. Moreover, this government would have the right to tax the colonies to finance its operations.

Historians who argue that English settlers in America were being transformed into Americans during the colonial era see in the Albany Congress evidence that the colonists were already thinking of, and tinkering with, plans for union 20 years before the Revolution. These historians point to the Albany Congress as proof that these colonists were thinking of what connected them with one another – what common interests, concerns, and values they shared. They see in the Ben Franklin's Plan of Union evidence that American settlers were looking beyond their own colonial borders and seeking support from their fellow Americans, seeing their security and prosperity tied to some sort of continental union between their different colonies. To these historians, the Albany Congress was an important middle stage that arose from colonies that were disparate and atomized, and from colonists who were *English* in their frame of reference, to the Stamp Act Congress and the Continental Congress, and to settlers who saw themselves as *Americans*.

What is lost in this temptation to see the Albany Plan of Union as a precursor to the United States – specifically, to the US Constitution – is that the Albany Congress was convened not by any of the colonies, but by the Board of Trade in London. It was a *British* initiative, rather than an American one. Ben Franklin saw his plan as a way to strengthen colonial ties to Britain, and to integrate the colonies into the fabric of the British Empire. Moreover, not one single colony approved Franklin's Plan of Union. The colonies rejected the Albany Plan because they were not interested in an American government coordinating the policies of the different colonies and having jurisdiction over and within these colonies.

This is why that second (and smaller) group of historians sees the Albany Plan as evidence for its alternate understanding of the American Revolution as an effort to preserve the status quo. Instead of highlighting the settlers' transformation into Americans during the colonial era, the story of the Albany Plan points to continuity – the colonists rejected Franklin's Plan of Union because they remained traditionalist and conventional Englishmen, whose frame of reference and allegiance was provincial, not national. And they remained so during the American Revolution – the colonists who rejected the Albany Plan in 1754 to preserve colonial autonomy, rejected Britain's imperial reforms for the very same purpose in 1776. They therefore enacted a constitution (the Articles of Confederation, the first US constitution) that enshrined the sovereignty of the individual states and denied the sovereignty of the United States of America. And they later strongly opposed the more nationalist Federal Constitution of 1787 on the same grounds, demanding assurances – in writing – about preserving state sovereignty and autonomy.

These historians can quote Franklin himself to support their assessment of American suspicions and fears regarding a common government. After the French and Indian War, Franklin revisited the rejection of the Albany Plan, explaining that the colonies had always been too fixated on their differing interests and circumstances, too attached to their autonomy, and too distrustful of one another to grant one colony power over another.[1] "[However] necessary an Union of the Colonies has long been for their common Defense and Security against their Enemies, and how sensible soever each Colony has been of that Necessity, yet they have never been able to effect such an Union among themselves, nor even to agree in requesting the Mother Country to establish it for them."[2] That is, despite the settlers' recognition of the practical benefits of a united government, "when they come to the Manner and Form of the Union, their weak Noddles are perfectly distracted."[3]

In this debate among historians, Americans have generally preferred the first interpretation of the American Revolution over the second. They prefer to see the Revolution as a normal revolution – a revolution designed to enact change, rather than to preserve the status quo. They see the Revolution as a war of national liberation, designed to form a new (and novel) national government for a new nation, rather than as a conservative resistance movement designed to preserve the longstanding autonomy of local communities and local governments.

Thus, a cursory search on Google and Google Books about the Albany Plan yields results such as "Even though rejected, some features of this plan were later adopted in the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution"; "Nothing immediately came of the Albany Plan"; "the proverbial American unification genie was now out of the bag"; and "after the colonies survived this final onslaught of French imperial design, they would […] cultivate these seeds of union into

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[1] Benjamin Franklin, "Reasons and Motives for the Albany Plan of Union, [July 1754]," *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, Vol. 5, July 1, 1753, through March 31, 1755,* ed. Leonard W. Labaree (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 397-418.

[2] Benjamin Franklin, *The Interest of Great Britain Considered, With Regard to her Colonies, And the Acquisitions of Canada and Guadaloupe…* (London: Printed for T. Becket, 1760).

[3] Benjamin Franklin, letter to Peter Collinson (29 December 1754), in *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin* (1905), ed. Albert Henry Smyth, Vol. III, 242.

the tender shoots of the Articles of Confederation that would pave the way for the Constitution of the United States." Indeed, at the outbreak of the Revolutionary War (1775), it was Franklin who first proposed to the Continental Congress a "sketch for Articles of Confederation." For these historians, therefore, and for the general public (generally), the story of the Albany Plan ends not with its rejection by American colonists, but rather with the ratification of the Federal Constitution, a plan of union, 34 years later.

Ben Franklin's reputation did not suffer following the colonists' rejection of his 1754 Plan of Union. He remained a widely popular and trusted public figure in Pennsylvania and the colonies generally. A decade later, during the Stamp Act crisis, Franklin again found himself at odds with his countrymen when he promoted yet another scheme to integrate the colonies more fully into Britain's imperial structure (through direct representation for colonists in Parliament). As opposition to the Stamp Act rose to a fevered pitch, however, Franklin reversed himself to clarify his allegiance to the American cause, for which his countrymen rewarded him with acclaim and approval. Even the stream of reports about his sexual depravities failed to dampen Americans' affection for him. Franklin's immunity to historical revisionism – that is, his popularity among historians – is a reflection of his popularity with Americans in his own time. Other Founding Fathers (Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison, and Adams) have received rougher treatment from historians because, as chief executives, they necessarily took actions that drew the ire of half the country in their day. By contrast, Franklin was primarily an ambassador for America – first for Pennsylvania, then for other colonies, then for the United States of America. He thus aligned himself with the American consensus, which he articulated with charm and conviction. He is at the heart of the American consensus today because he took care to place himself there during his career in public life.

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