



A modern interpretation of George Washington surveying the wilderness in the 1750s

PROVIDENTIAL BEGINNINGS

A STANDING MIRACLE

"The singular interpositions of Providence in our feeble condition were such, as could scarcely escape the attention of the most unobserving, while the unparalleled perseverance of the armies of the United States, through almost every possible suffering and discouragement, for the space of eight long years, was little short of a standing miracle."³⁴ ~ George Washington, Farewell Address to the Army, November 2, 1783

When he said goodbye to his soldiers at the end of the Revolutionary War in 1783, General George Washington was thankful. He described their victory over the greatest army at the time, the British military, as "little short of a standing miracle."³⁵ Washington gratefully credited Providence, which ministers defined as God's Presence, for their victory.

Washington was no stranger to miracles. He had used similar words three decades earlier in 1755 when he experienced a miraculous survival on the battlefield at the age of 23 as a colonel in what historians call the French and Indian War, which pitted the English and their native allies against the French and their native allies.

"As I have heard since my arrival at this place, a circumstantial account of my death and dying speech, I take this early opportunity of assuring you that I have not, as yet, composed the latter. But by the all-powerful dispensation of Providence, I have been protected beyond all human probability and expectation for I had four bullets through my coat and two horses shot under me, yet although death was levelling my companions on every side of me, escaped unhurt," Washington wrote his brother Jack on July 18, 1755.³⁶

Colonel Washington was part of a joint force of Virginia militia and regular British soldiers, who were ambushed by the French and their native allies on July 9, 1755, in the Ohio River Valley near what is now Pittsburg. A few weeks later, Presbyterian minister Samuel Davies preached to soldiers in Hanover, Virginia. Davies, who had been part of the Great Awakening spiritual movement, gave a prophetic word about Washington's survival. "As a remarkable instance of this, I may point out to the public that heroic youth Colonel Washington, whom I cannot but hope Providence has hitherto preserved in so signal a manner, for some important service to his country."³⁷

Davies was not the only one to predict that Washington's life had been spared for future service to a great nation. Years later in 1770, when Washington returned to the Ohio River Valley, a chief visited Washington and gave him a prophetic oracle.

The chief remembered Washington from the July 1755 battle because Washington's towering height caused him to stand out among the officers. Back then, he had told his young warriors to aim for Washington, but they'd repeatedly missed. Their attempt to kill him "was all in vain, a power mightier far than we, shielded him from harm."³⁸ This

miraculous protection led him to predict that Washington would not die in battle but would lead a nation. “Listen! The Great Spirit protects that man, and guides his destinies — he will become the chief of nations, and a people yet unborn will hail him as the founder of a mighty empire.”³⁹

The chief’s oracle made a strong impression on Dr. James Craik, a physician who was with Washington at the time. Craik later accompanied Washington during the Revolutionary War. “Yes, I do believe, a Great Spirit protects that man — and that one day or other, honored and beloved, he will be the chief of our nation, as he is now our general, our father, and our friend. Never mind the enemy, they cannot kill him, and while he lives, our cause will never die,”⁴⁰ Craik declared in 1777. Believing in the justice of America’s cause, Washington’s perseverance and commitment to preserve the army led to America’s miraculous founding.

“You gave me life and showed me kindness, and in your Providence, watched over my spirit,” Job 10:12



JOIN OR DIE

Ben Franklin created and published the *Join or Die* graphic, the first political newspaper cartoon in America, in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on May 9, 1754. Franklin used the word *join* three times to make his point that Britain's American colonies needed to join together and unite to fight the French.

"In the present disunited state of the British colonies and the extreme difficulties of bringing so many different governments and assemblies to agree in any speedy and effectual measures for our common defense and security," he wrote, noting that in contrast "our enemy have the very great distinction of being under one direction with one council and one purse."⁴¹ The article accompanying this graphic was about a report from the newsmaker of the era, George Washington.



A modern rendering of Benjamin Franklin's *Join or Die* graphic depicting the 13 colonies through segments of a snake.



A modern rendition of Benjamin Franklin at work

COLONIAL CANCEL CULTURE & FREE SPEECH

*D*ecades before the first shots of the French and Indian War in the 1750s and the American Revolution in the 1770s were fired, newspaper publisher Ben Franklin experienced colonial-style cancel culture. Newspapers were new in America in the 1720s and 1730s. The rise of this new social media presented challenges in the culture and to the government. Franklin's response and practices set the standards for enacting freedom of the press and freedom of speech in newspapers that endured for centuries in America.

"Being frequently censur'd and condemn'd by different persons for printing things which they say ought not to be printed, I have sometimes thought it might be necessary to make a standing apology for myself, and publish it once a year,"⁴² Franklin printed in a newspaper article on June 10, 1731, in his *Pennsylvania Gazette*.

Franklin was being culturally canceled because he had published an advertisement from a ship captain that insulted the clergy by comparing them to loud birds. "Men are very angry with me on this occasion, that it could proceed from nothing but my abundant malice against religion and the clergy. They therefore declare they will not take any more of my papers, nor have any further dealings with me; but will hinder me of all the custom they

can. All this is very hard!”⁴³

Denying him custom meant that they were socially ostracizing him. “I request all who are angry with me on the account of printing things they don’t like, calmly to consider these following particulars,”⁴⁴ he wrote, appealing to their logic. “That the business of printing has chiefly to do with men’s opinions; most things that are printed tending to promote some, or oppose others,” he explained, believing that “the opinions of men are almost as various as their faces.”⁴⁵ He noted that most professions, such as carpenters and shoemakers, sold their products to everyone of all persuasions, religions, and ethnicities, without risk of “suffering the least censure or ill-will” or offending them.

“That it is as unreasonable ... to expect (everyone) to be pleas’d with everything that is printed, as to think that nobody ought to be pleas’d but themselves.”⁴⁶ His job was not to tell people what to think but to give people a chance to make up their own minds through conflicting opinions.

“Printers are educated in the belief that when men differ in opinion, both sides ought equally to have the advantage of being heard by the public,”⁴⁷ Franklin wrote. “Being thus continually employ’d in serving all parties, printers naturally acquire a vast unconcernedness as to the right or wrong opinions contain’d in what they print,”⁴⁸ he explained of tolerance. “They print things full of spleen and animosity, with the utmost calmness and indifference, and without the least ill-will to the persons reflected on.”⁴⁹ Franklin’s role was to allow others to communicate without controlling them.

“That it is unreasonable to imagine printers approve of everything they print, and to censure them on any particular thing accordingly; since in the way of their business they print such great variety of things opposite and contradictory.”⁵⁰ What would happen if publishers and editors only printed opinions they agreed with? “An end would thereby be put to free writing, and the world would afterwards have nothing to read but what happen’d to be the opinions of printers.”⁵¹

In his view, freedom of speech would end and the world would only know one point of view, that of the publishers. Franklin avoided items that would “do real injury to any person, how much soever I have been solicited, and tempted with offers of great pay.”⁵²

What did he believe would happen when different hypotheses were presented, whether in science, literature, or religion? The truth would win in the end. “That when truth and error have fair play, the former is always an overmatch for the latter.”⁵³ Thus, Franklin set standards for free speech and freedom of the press. He believed that truth and evidence would win instead of error and falsehoods. His printing presses were the neutral referee. Franklin declared that he would not be canceled. “I shall continue my business. I shall not burn my press and melt my letters.”⁵⁴

INJUSTICES BEHIND THE FIRST AMENDMENT

Years earlier Franklin had witnessed government tyranny as the British authorities tried to cancel the business of his older brother, James. When officials in Boston didn’t like James’s newspaper, they threw him in jail for not having a government license to publish. Though

he was only 16, Benjamin took over printing his brother's paper, the *New England Courant*. Using the nickname Silence Dogood to conceal his identity, Ben published a series of essays promoting freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

"Without freedom of thought there can be no such thing as wisdom and no such thing as public liberty without freedom of speech. ... Whoever would overthrow the liberty of a nation, must begin by subduing freeness of speech . . ." ⁵⁵ he published in his jailed brother's newspaper on July 9, 1722.

Although government officials freed James, they published a resolution against him and attempted to control what he and others published. "Resolved, that no such weekly paper be hereafter printed or published without the same be first perused and allowed by the secretary, as has been usual (for other papers)." ⁵⁶

Ben never forgot this censorship lesson. Moving to Philadelphia, he bought a newspaper business and published the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. Because the Southern colonies had few printing presses, he also published *Poor Richard's Almanac* for all the colonies. Through these publications, Franklin vaulted the newspaper industry into a golden age. Newspapers opened the colonists' minds to knowledge about each other and played a key role along the road to revolution. For these reasons, Franklin deserves to be called the father of freedom of speech and the press in America.

A CULTURE OF GRATITUDE

*F*ollowing the habits of the pilgrims and first settlers, giving thanks to God was an important part of Franklin's culture. First, thanksgiving was a regular part of weekly worship, whether the worshippers were Maryland's Catholics, Rhode Island's and Philadelphia's Jews, or Protestants from New England to Georgia.

Second, celebrating an annual harvest and listening to Thanksgiving sermons were important times of giving thanks. Though not a widespread national observance in Franklin's day, showing gratitude through feasting and worship remained common.

Third, giving thanks was a private practice. Franklin wrote a personal liturgy that he used in place of attending public worship. His liturgy included adoration, petition, and thanks to God. "I had some years before compos'd a little liturgy or form of prayer for my own private use, viz, in 1728 entitled Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion." ⁵⁷

Franklin thanked God for life's essentials. "For peace and liberty, for food and raiment, for corn and wine, and milk, and every kind of healthful nourishment—Good God, I thank thee." Fittingly for this freedom of speech advocate, he also focused on God's gift of words, which he loved. "For knowledge and literature and every useful art; for my friends and their prosperity, and for the fewness of my enemies,—Good God, I thank thee. For all thy innumerable benefits; for life and reason, and the use of speech, for health and joy and every pleasant hour,—my Good God, I thank thee." ⁵⁸