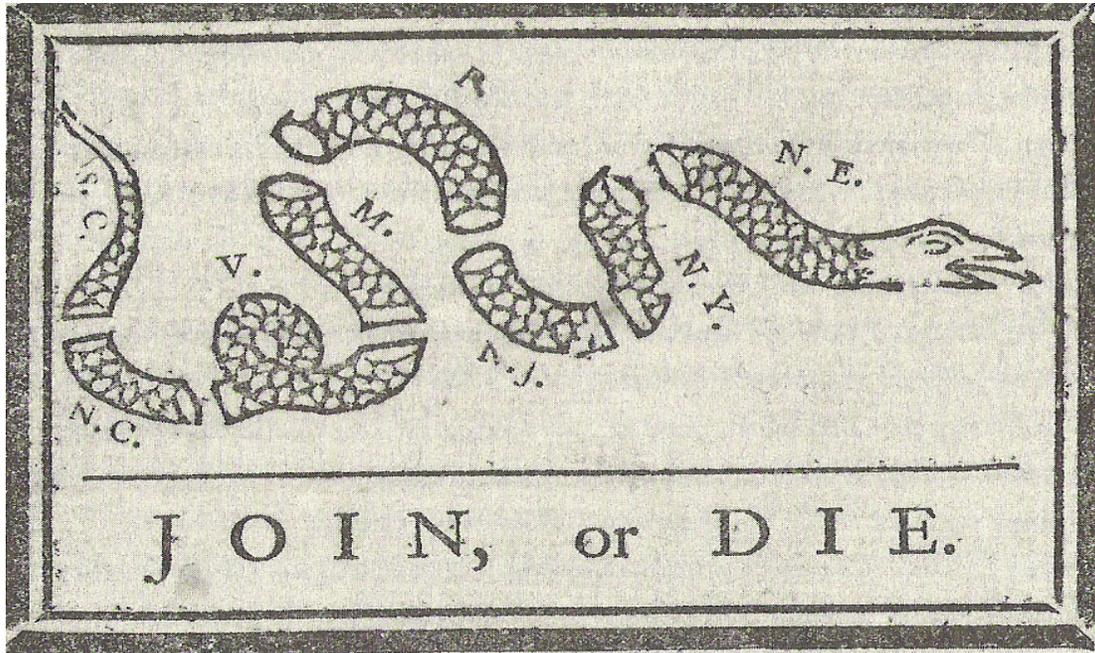


“Join or Die,” America’s First Political Cartoon: Benjamin Franklin and the First Plan for Union



Courtesy of Library of Congress

On May 9, 1754, Benjamin Franklin printed the first political cartoon in American history, a woodcut of a severed snake entitled “Join, or Die,” in his newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. Franklin’s cartoon depicted the British North American colonies as a snake cut into eight segments, with each segment designated with an initial of a separate colony or a region as in the case of New England. An editorial discussing the “disunited state” of the colonies accompanied the cartoon, clearly suggesting that in light of the clear and present danger posed by the French and Native Americans to their security, the colonies faced a critical decision—to unite as a collective unit to repulse the enemy or remain disunited and suffer an inevitable death.

The division of the segments of the snake reveals the extent to which Franklin and other intellectuals believed that the colonies of British North America were divided over the decision to go to war with the French and Native Americans for control of the land west of the Appalachian Mountains. Despite this division, it was a well-known superstition of the era that a snake, which had been cut into pieces, would come back to life if each of the pieces were put together before sunset. The caption, “Join, or Die,” implied that the colonies should unite or be exterminated by the French and their Indian allies.

Franklin’s cartoon was widely used as a header for newspapers in its time. Since copyright laws were non-existent, the cartoon was copied throughout the colonies. Franklin’s cartoon became a symbol during the American Revolution, despite the fact that this was not its intended purpose. The cartoon’s message worked surprisingly well with the Revolutionary generation as the colonies were as equally divided then as to whether or not to join the war

against the mother country as the colonies were in the 1750s as they faced the difficult decision whether or not to join the British in their worldwide war against the French.

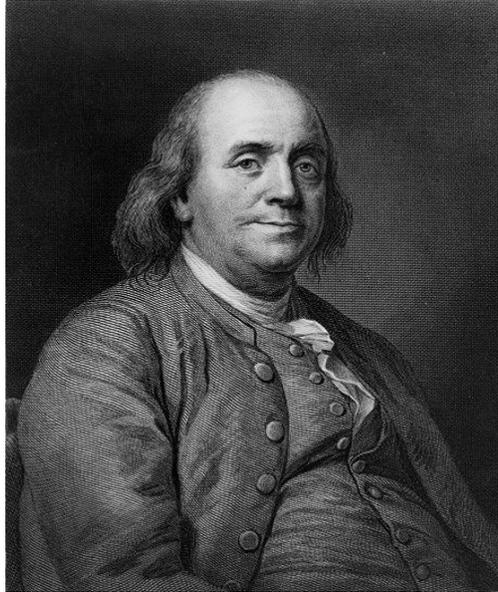
Among all of America's wars from 1750 to the present, the Seven Years War, popularly known as the French and Indian War achieved the fourth highest rate of mobilization and, measured by casualties per capita (excluding Native Americans), it was the third bloodiest contest Americans have ever fought. Only the American Revolution, the Civil War, and World War II put a higher percentage of men under arms. Only the American Revolution and the Civil War killed a higher percentage of those mobilized. In addition, the Seven Years War, one of four destructive conflicts waged between Britain and France from 1689 to 1763, was also the biggest and produced the most sweeping results of a nearly century long rivalry between the two European powers. When the conflict came to a close, Britain emerged victorious, becoming the dominant power in most of what is now the eastern United States and Canada.

When war broke out between France and Britain in the mainland colonies of North America in 1754, most colonists expected a limited clash. New England colonists, however, saw an apocalyptic struggle between Protestant freedom and popish slavery. One New England preacher, who sensed an ulterior motive behind Catholic France's decision to stand firm against the British in North America, declared "The continent is not wide enough for us both, and they [the French] intend to have the whole."

British officials, cognizant of the French-Indian alliances in the Great Lakes region and the strains the war would put on its North American colonies, urged New York colonial leaders to host an intercolonial congress to meet at Albany with representatives of the Six Nations of the Iroquois to not only redress their grievances but also consider issues of defense and security among the colonies. New York's Governor heeded the call from London and invited every colony as far south as Virginia, except the non-royal colonies of Connecticut and Rhode Island, to attend. Virginia and New Jersey declined the invitation. Massachusetts Governor William Shirley, desirous of some plan for intercolonial union, invited Connecticut and Rhode Island to attend the Albany meeting on his own initiative.

In Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin too was thinking about devising a plan of colonial union. In fact, Franklin had been thinking about the union of the North American colonies for more than a decade. The American Philosophical Society, which he first proposed in 1743, was designed to bring intellectuals from the various colonies together in dialogue. Through his association with the Society, James Parker, a close friend of Franklin, had sent him a pamphlet by a New York official, Archibald Kennedy, entitled *The Importance of Gaining and Preserving the Friendship of the Indians to the British Interest Considered*. Like Kennedy and several other colonial intellectuals, Franklin agreed that if the British Empire were to become as great as they imagined, then the French had to be repulsed in British North America and the Indians had to become allies of the English. If neither the colonists nor the British acted, the French would occupy the entire Ohio Valley, assume control over the Indian trade, and cut Britain off from access to the continent's interior. Franklin and like minded intellectuals maintained that some sort of intercolonial union for Indian affairs and defense needed to be cultivated, a structure that would transcend the governments of the various colonies. Franklin asked himself why couldn't the colonists follow the example of the Indians, to unite in common cause to wage war against a

common enemy. "It would be a very strange Thing," Franklin contemplated, "if six Nations of ignorant Savages should be capable of forming a Scheme for such an Union, and be able to execute it in such a Manner as that it has subsisted for Ages, and appears indissoluble; and yet a like Union should be impracticable for ten or a Dozen English Colonies, to whom it is more necessary, and must be more advantageous; and who cannot be supposed to want an equal Understanding of their Interests."



Library of Congress

Franklin set to work to devise a draft of a plan for an imperial union of the various colonies; however, he realized that they could not rely solely on the royal governors and members of the assemblies of each of the colonies to take action on this issue as they were too distracted in their own local squabbles to consider the English empire as a whole. Franklin began to develop a solution in which intercolonial union would rely on a few good honest men, perhaps even a single man, to set matters straight in British North America. In a 1751 letter to James Parker, Franklin wrote:

Now, if you were to pick out half a Dozen Men of good Understanding and Address, and furnish them with a reasonable Scheme and proper Instructions, and send them in the Nature of Ambassadors to the other Colonies, where they might apply particularly to all the leading Men, and by proper Management get them to engage in promoting the Scheme; where, by being present, they would have the Opportunity of pressing the Affair both in publick and private, obviating Difficulties as they arise, answering Objections as soon as they are made, before they spread and gather Strength in the Minds of the People, &c, &c. I imagine such a Union might thereby be made and established: For reasonable sensible Men, can always make a reasonable Scheme appear such to other reasonable Men, if they take Pains, and have Time and Opportunity for it.

Franklin believed a voluntary union entered into by the colonies was preferable to a system imposed by Parliament. He proposed an intercolonial council comprised of representatives from each of the mainland colonies, with a governor appointed by the British Crown. He suggested

that the money required to operate the union might be raised by an excise tax on liquor. In order to avoid jealousy among the colonies, he presented the idea of a rotating council to hold its meetings from colony to colony.

Therefore, when British officials with the Board of Trade in London, who were also worried about the likelihood of a French and Indian alliance, announced a call for an unprecedented meeting of commissioners from the various colonies to meet in Albany, New York to negotiate a treaty with the Six Nations of the Iroquois, they found a responsive enclave of colonial intellectuals who greeted the announcement with enthusiasm.

Franklin set the parameters of the debate for intercolonial union that would be hotly contested over the next several months, first within the Albany Congress, followed within each colonial government, and finally to be decided on in the mother country. As the Albany Congress convened on June 19, 1754, the delegates squabbled over precedence. Yet, despite the absence of a delegation from Virginia and New Jersey, the delegates managed to agree unanimously on June 24 that some sort of colonial union was needed, and they appointed a committee made up of a single representative from each colony to draw up such a plan. Pennsylvania's delegates agree to appoint Franklin to serve as their representative on the committee because he, unlike the other delegates to the Congress, had come prepared with a well thought out plan. Although he originally believed that such a union ought to be organized by the colonies themselves, Franklin's plan had evolved to a union in which Parliament established. Local squabbles convinced Franklin that only action by Parliament could bring about the union he and other colonial intellectuals envisioned.

The debates on Franklin's plan went on daily in hand with the Indian business. There were numerous objections to the original plan but these obstacles to a union were shortly overcome and the plan received a unanimous vote in the affirmative on July 10. Franklin conceded a few points of his original plan as objections were raised by some of the delegates; however, the substance of Franklin's plan remained largely intact.

According to the final version of the Albany Plan, the union was to be headed by a "President General" appointed and paid by the British Crown. The President General, who would be granted responsibility for making war and peace with the Indians, raising soldiers and constructing forts, regulating the Indian trade, purchasing land from the Indians, bestowing that land to colonists, drafting laws, and levying taxes, was to be aided by a "Grand Council" composed of representatives from each of the colonies and selected by the respective colonial legislature in proportion to their monetary contributions to the general treasury. Together, these two branches of the unified government—the President General and the Grand Council—would regulate colonial Indian relations and also resolve territorial disputes among the various colonies. The plan—entirely out of touch with public opinion and the political realities of the mid-eighteenth century—was then sent to both the Board of Trade and the colonial assemblies, which promptly rejected the Albany Plan.

Despite the emerging cry for union throughout the colonies, the various colonial assemblies either chose to reject the Albany Plan or proved reluctant to act on it at all. They sensed that the Albany Congress had devised a system of government that would curb their own

authority and territorial rights. Likewise, British officials were hesitant to adopt the Albany Plan as they began to worry about the reality that the colonies may in fact unite in common cause and they sensed the possible threat that such a union could pose for the mother country. The Speaker of the House of Commons warned the Duke of Newcastle, the official responsible for American affairs, of the “ill consequences to be apprehended from uniting too closely the northern colonies with each other, an Independency upon this country to be feared from such an union.” British officials now realized what they hadn’t had time to consider when they urged a colonial union at the outbreak of the French and Indian War—such a plan of intercolonial union could possibly create a very powerful entity that the British Empire might not be able to control.

Franklin later observed of his plan for intercolonial union that “Its Fate was singular. The Assemblies did not adopt it, as they all thought there was too much *Prerogative* in it; and in England it was judg’d to have too much of the *Democratic*.... I am still of Opinion it would have been happy for both Sides the Water if it had been adopted. The Colonies so united would have been sufficiently strong to have defended themselves; there would have been no need of Troops from England; of course the subsequent Pretence for Taxing America, and the bloody Contest it occasioned, would have been avoided. But such Mistakes are not new; History is full of the Errors of States & Princes.” Franklin went on to quote the following passage: “*Look round the habitable World, how few Know their own Good, or knowing it pursue.*”

The Albany Plan of Union in 1754, which presented a farsighted proposal for intercolonial cooperation and imperial defense, is significant for two reasons. First, it anticipated the problems that would best such the American republican government created after independence, such as finance, dealing with various Native American tribes, control of commerce, and national defense. Second, it contained the seeds of a true union of states, and many of these ideas would be revived and adopted in Philadelphia during the Constitutional Convention of 1787. The Albany Plan hinted at the idea of establishing a common governmental authority—separated from not only the mother country but also from other British colonies in the West Indies and elsewhere—to deal with both internal and external relations

Urging the colonists to overcome their parochial interests and form a strong union, Franklin’s popular woodcut—“Join, or Die”—achieved its greatest influence on those of the Revolutionary generation. Not until the American Revolution, however, did unity, in the vision of Franklin, outweigh long-standing suspicions of one another.

Albany Plan of Union (1754)

It is proposed that humble application be made for an act of Parliament of Great Britain, by virtue of which one general government may be formed in America, including all the said colonies, within and under which government each colony may retain its present constitution, except in the particulars wherein a change may be directed by the said act, as hereafter follows.

1. That the said general government be administered by a President-General, to be appointed and supported by the crown; and a Grand Council, to be chosen by the representatives of the people of the several Colonies met in their respective assemblies.

2. That within -- months after the passing such act, the House of Representatives that happen to be sitting within that time, or that shall especially for that purpose convened, may and shall choose members for the Grand Council, in the following proportion, that is to say,

Massachusetts Bay	7
New Hampshire	2
Connecticut	5
Rhode Island	2
New York	4
New Jersey	3
Pennsylvania	6
Maryland	4
Virginia	7
North Carolina	4
South Carolina	4

	48

3. -- who shall meet for the first time at the city of Philadelphia, being called by the President-General as soon as conveniently may be after his appointment.

4. That there shall be a new election of the members of the Grand Council every three years; and, on the death or resignation of any member, his place should be supplied by a new choice at the next sitting of the Assembly of the Colony he represented.

5. That after the first three years, when the proportion of money arising out of each Colony to the general treasury can be known, the number of members to be chosen for each Colony shall, from time to time, in all ensuing elections, be regulated by that proportion, yet so as that the number to be chosen by any one Province be not more than seven, nor less than two.

6. That the Grand Council shall meet once in every year, and oftener if occasion require, at such time and place as they shall adjourn to at the last preceding meeting, or as they shall be called to meet at by the President-General on any emergency; he having first obtained in writing the consent of seven of the members to such call, and sent duly and timely notice to the whole.

7. That the Grand Council have power to choose their speaker; and shall neither be dissolved, prorogued, nor continued sitting longer than six weeks at one time, without their own consent or the special command of the crown.

8. That the members of the Grand Council shall be allowed for their service ten shillings sterling per diem, during their session and journey to and from the place of meeting; twenty miles to be reckoned a day's journey.

9. That the assent of the President-General be requisite to all acts of the Grand Council, and that it be his office and duty to cause them to be carried into execution.

10. That the President-General, with the advice of the Grand Council, hold or direct all Indian treaties, in which the general interest of the Colonies may be concerned; and make peace or declare war with Indian nations.
11. That they make such laws as they judge necessary for regulating all Indian trade.
12. That they make all purchases from Indians, for the crown, of lands not now within the bounds of particular Colonies, or that shall not be within their bounds when some of them are reduced to more convenient dimensions.
13. That they make new settlements on such purchases, by granting lands in the King's name, reserving a quitrent to the crown for the use of the general treasury.
14. That they make laws for regulating and governing such new settlements, till the crown shall think fit to form them into particular governments.
15. That they raise and pay soldiers and build forts for the defence of any of the Colonies, and equip vessels of force to guard the coasts and protect the trade on the ocean, lakes, or great rivers; but they shall not impress men in any Colony, without the consent of the Legislature.
16. That for these purposes they have power to make laws, and lay and levy such general duties, imposts, or taxes, as to them shall appear most equal and just (considering the ability and other circumstances of the inhabitants in the several Colonies), and such as may be collected with the least inconvenience to the people; rather discouraging luxury, than loading industry with unnecessary burdens.
17. That they may appoint a General Treasurer and Particular Treasurer in each government when necessary; and, from time to time, may order the sums in the treasuries of each government into the general treasury; or draw on them for special payments, as they find most convenient.
18. Yet no money to issue but by joint orders of the President-General and Grand Council; except where sums have been appropriated to particular purposes, and the President-General is previously empowered by an act to draw such sums.
19. That the general accounts shall be yearly settled and reported to the several Assemblies.
20. That a quorum of the Grand Council, empowered to act with the President-General, do consist of twenty-five members; among whom there shall be one or more from a majority of the Colonies.
21. That the laws made by them for the purposes aforesaid shall not be repugnant, but, as near as may be, agreeable to the laws of England, and shall be transmitted to the King in Council for approbation, as soon as may be after their passing; and if not disapproved within three years after presentation, to remain in force.

22. That, in case of the death of the President-General, the Speaker of the Grand Council for the time being shall succeed, and be vested with the same powers and authorities, to continue till the King's pleasure be known.

23. That all military commission officers, whether for land or sea service, to act under this general constitution, shall be nominated by the President-General; but the approbation of the Grand Council is to be obtained, before they receive their commissions. And all civil officers are to be nominated by the Grand Council, and to receive the President-General's approbation before they officiate.

24. But, in case of vacancy by death or removal of any officer, civil or military, under this constitution, the Governor of the Province in which such vacancy happens may appoint, till the pleasure of the President-General and Grand Council can be known.

25. That the particular military as well as civil establishments in each Colony remain in their present state, the general constitution notwithstanding; and that on sudden emergencies any Colony may defend itself, and lay the accounts of expense thence arising before the President-General and General Council, who may allow and order payment of the same, as far as they judge such accounts just and reasonable.

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