

Benjamin Franklin

RULES by which a GREAT EMPIRE may be reduced to a SMALL ONE

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Franklin wrote this satirical piece while serving in London as the colonial agent for several colonies. His numerous letters to London newspapers presenting the colonists' point of view were often reprinted in colonial newspapers.

An ancient Sage boasted that tho' he could not fiddle, he knew how to make a *great city* of a *little one*. The science that I, a modern simpleton, am about to communicate is the very reverse.

I address myself to all Ministers¹ who have the management of extensive dominions [empires], which from their very greatness are become troublesome to govern because the multiplicity of their affairs leaves no Time for *fiddling*.

- I. In the first place, gentlemen, you are to consider that a great Empire, like a great cake, is most easily diminished at the edges. Turn your attention, therefore, first to your remotest provinces, that as you get rid of them, the next may follow in order.
- II. [So] that the possibility of this separation may always exist, take special care the provinces are never incorporated with the mother country, that they do not enjoy the same common rights, the same privileges in commerce, and that they are governed by *severer* laws, all of *your enacting*, without allowing them any share in the choice of the legislators. By carefully making and preserving such distinctions, you will (to keep to my simile of the cake) act like a wise gingerbread baker who, to facilitate a division, cuts his dough half through in those places where, when baked, he would have it *broken to pieces*.
- III. These remote provinces have perhaps been acquired, purchased, or conquered at the *sole expense* of the settlers or their ancestors without the aid of the mother country. If these should happen to increase her *strength* by their growing numbers ready to join in her wars, her *commerce* by their growing demand for her manufactures, or her *naval power* by greater employment for her ships and seamen, they may probably suppose some merit in this, and that it entitles them to some favor. You are therefore to *forget it all* or resent it as if they had done you Injury. If they happen to be zealous Whigs, friends of liberty, nurtured in revolution principles, *remember all that* to their prejudice and resolve to punish it: for such principles, after a revolution is thoroughly established, are of *no more use*; they are even *odious* and *abominable*.
- IV. However peaceably your colonies have submitted to your government, shown their affection to your interests, and patiently borne their grievances, you are to *suppose* them always inclined to revolt and treat them accordingly. Quarter troops among them, who by their insolence may *provoke* the rising of mobs, and by their bullets and bayonets *suppress* them. By this means, like the husband who uses his wife ill *from suspicion*, you may in time convert your *suspicious* into *realities*.



Benjamin Franklin, 1778
oil portrait by Joseph Siffred Duplessis

distance of
colonies
from
Britain

rights &
privileges
of colonists
as British
subjects;
legislation
without
representation
in Parliament

contribution
of colonies
to economic
and military
power of
British empire

colonists'
motives &
allegiance
to Britain;
treatment as
potential
rebels

- V. Remote provinces must have *Governors* and *Judges* to represent the Royal Person and execute everywhere the delegated parts of his office and authority. You ministers know that much of the strength of government depends on the *opinion* of the people; and much of that opinion on the choice of rulers placed immediately over them. If you send them wise and good men for governors, who study the interest of the colonists and advance their prosperity, they will think their king wise and good and that he wishes the welfare of his subjects. If you send them learned and upright men for Judges, they will think him a lover of justice. This may attach your provinces more to his government. You are, therefore, to be careful who you recommend for those offices. — If you can find prodigals who have ruined their fortunes, broken gamesters or stock-jobbers, these may do well as *Governors* for they will probably be rapacious and provoke the people by their extortions. Wrangling Proctors and pettyfogging Lawyers, too, are not amiss, for they will be forever disputing and quarrelling with their little parliaments. If withal, they should be ignorant, wrong-headed and insolent, so much the better. Attorneys Clerks and Newgate Solicitors will do for *Chief Justices*, especially if they hold their places *during your pleasure*.² And all will contribute to impress those ideas of your government that are proper for a people *you would wish to renounce it*.
- VI. To confirm these impressions and strike them deeper, whenever the injured come to the capital with complaints of mal-administration, oppression, or injustice, punish such suitors with long delay, enormous expense, and a final judgment in favor of the oppressor. This will have an admirable effect every way. The trouble of future complaints will be prevented, and Governors and Judges will be encouraged to further acts of oppression and injustice, and thence the people may become more disaffected *and at length desperate*.
- VII. When such Governors have crammed their coffers and made themselves so odious to the people that they can no longer remain among them with safety to their persons, recall and *reward* them with pensions. You may make them *Baronets* too, if that respectable order should not think fit to resent it. All will contribute to encourage new Governors in the same practices and make the supreme government *detestable*.
- VIII. If when you are engaged in war, your colonies should vie in liberal aids of men and money against the common enemy upon your simple requisition, and give far beyond their abilities. Reflect that a penny taken from them by your power is more honorable to you than a pound presented by their benevolence. Despise, therefore, their voluntary grants, and resolve to harass them with novel taxes. They will probably complain to your parliaments that they are taxed by a body in which they have no representative, and that this is contrary to common right. They will petition for redress. Let the parliaments flout their claims, reject their petitions, refuse even to suffer the reading of them, and treat the petitioners with the utmost contempt. Nothing can have a better effect in producing the alienation proposed, for though many can forgive injuries, *none ever forgave contempt*.
- IX. In laying these taxes, never regard the heavy burdens those remote people already undergo in defending their own frontiers, supporting their own provincial governments, making new roads, building bridges, churches, and other public edifices, which in old countries have been done to your hands by your ancestors, but which occasion [cause] constant calls and demands on the purses of a new people. Forget the *restraints* you lay on their trade for *your own* benefit and the advantage a *monopoly* of this trade gives your exacting merchants. Think nothing of the wealth those merchants and your manufacturers acquire by the colony commerce, their

quality and character of appointed governors and judges

critics of corrupt and unjust governors and judges

corrupt and distrusted governors

treatment of colonists' contributions in wartime and petitions for redress of grievances

taxation without consideration of colonies' economic burdens

² I.e., at your determination, with no official term limit.

increased ability thereby to pay taxes at home, their accumulating in the price of their commodities most of those taxes, and so levying them from their consuming customers. All this, and the employment and support of thousands of your poor by the colonists, you are *entirely to forget*. But remember to make your arbitrary tax more grievous to your provinces by public declarations importing that your power of taxing them has *no limits*, so that when you take from them without their consent one shilling in the pound, you have a clear right to the other nineteen. This will probably weaken every idea of *security in their property* and convince them that under such a government *they have nothing they can call their own*, which can scarce fail of producing *the happiest consequences!*

- X. Possibly, indeed, some of them might still comfort themselves and say, “Though we have no property, we have yet *something* left that is valuable; we have constitutional *liberty* both of person and of conscience. This King, these Lords, and these Commons,³ who it seems are too remote from us to know us and feel for us, cannot take from us our *Habeas Corpus* right or our right of trial *by a jury of our neighbors*. They cannot deprive us of the exercise of our religion, alter our ecclesiastical constitutions, and compel us to be Papists [Roman Catholics] if they please, or Mahometans [Muslims].” To annihilate this comfort, begin by laws to perplex their commerce with infinite regulations, impossible to be remembered and observed. Ordain seizures of their property for every failure. Take away the trial of such property by jury, and give it to arbitrary Judges of your own appointing and of the lowest characters in the country, whose salaries and emoluments are to arise out of the duties or condemnations [of property], and whose appointments are *during pleasure*. Then let there be a formal declaration of both houses that opposition to your edicts is *treason*, and that persons suspected of treason in the provinces may, according to some obsolete law, be seized and sent to the metropolis of the empire for trial [London]; and pass an act that those there charged with certain other offenses shall be sent away in chains from their friends and country to be tried in the same manner for felony. Then erect a new Court of Inquisition among them, accompanied by an armed force, with instructions to transport all such suspected persons, to be ruined by the expense if they bring over evidences to prove their innocence, or be found guilty and hanged if they can’t afford it. And lest the people should think you cannot possibly go any farther, pass another solemn declaratory act that “King, Lords, and Commons had, hath, and of right ought to have, full power and authority to make statutes of sufficient force and validity to bind the unrepresented provinces IN ALL CASES WHATSOEVER.”⁴ This will include *spiritual* with temporal, and taken together must operate wonderfully to your purpose by convincing them that they are at present under a power something like that spoken of in the scriptures, which cannot only *kill their bodies* but *damn their souls* to all eternity by compelling them, if it pleases, *to worship the Devil*.
- XI. To make your taxes more odious and more likely to procure resistance, send from the capital a board of officers to superintend the collection, composed of the most *indiscrete, ill-bred, and insolent* you can find. Let these have large salaries out of the extorted revenue and live in open grating luxury upon the sweat and blood of the industrious, whom they are to worry continually with groundless and expensive prosecutions before the above-mentioned arbitrary revenue Judges, all *at the cost of the party prosecuted*, tho’ acquitted, because *the King is to pay no costs*. Let these men *by your order* be exempted from all the common taxes and burdens of the province, though they and their property are protected by its laws. If any revenue

removal of colonists' rights and privileges

regulation of colonial trade

appointment of judges

consequences of opposition

treatment of the accused

supreme authority of the king and Parliament

quality and character of customs officials; their salaries, special privileges, and treatment of colonists

³ Parliament: House of Lords & House of Commons.

⁴ From the Declaratory Act of 1764, passed by Parliament on the same day it repealed the Stamp Act.

officers are *suspected* of the least tenderness for the people, discard them. If others are justly complained of, protect and reward them. If any of the under-officers behave so as to provoke the people to drub [criticize harshly] them, promote those to better offices: this will encourage others to procure for themselves such profitable drubbings by multiplying and enlarging such provocations, and *all will work towards the end you aim at*.

XII. Another way to make your tax odious is to misapply the produce of it. If it was originally appropriated for the *defense* of the provinces, the better support of government and the administration of justice where it may be *necessary*, then apply none of it to that *defense*, but bestow it where it is *not necessary* in augmented salaries or pensions to every Governor who has distinguished himself by his enmity to the people, and by calumniating them to their Sovereign. This will make them pay it more unwillingly and be more apt to quarrel with those that collect it and those that imposed it, who will quarrel again with them, and all shall contribute to your *main purpose* of making them *weary of your government*.

use of taxes raised for defense to augment governors' salaries

XIII. If the people of any province have been accustomed to support their own Governors and Judges to satisfaction, you are to apprehend that such Governors and Judges may be thereby influenced to treat the people kindly and to do them justice. This is another reason for applying part of that revenue in larger salaries to such Governors and Judges, given, as their commissions are, *during your pleasure* only, forbidding them to take any salaries from their provinces, that thus the people may no longer hope any kindness from their Governors or (in Crown cases) any justice from their Judges. And as the money thus misapplied in one province is extorted from all, probably *all will resent the misapplication*.

... especially salaries of governors respected by colonists

XIV. If the parliaments of your provinces should dare to claim rights or complain of your administration, order them to be harassed with repeated *dissolutions*.⁵ If the same men are continually returned by new elections, adjourn their meetings to some country village where they cannot be accommodated and there keep them *during pleasure*. For this, you know, is your PREROGATIVE, and an excellent one it is, as you may manage it to promote discontents among the people, diminish their respect, and *increase their disaffection*.

treatment of colonial assemblies resisting imperial orders

XV. Convert the brave honest officers of your navy into pimping tide-waiters and colony officers of the customs. Let those who in time of war fought gallantly in defense of the commerce of their countrymen, in peace be taught to prey upon it. Let them learn to be corrupted by great and real smugglers; but (to show their diligence) scour with armed boats every bay, harbor, river, creek, cove or nook throughout the coast of your colonies. Stop and detain every coaster, every wood-boat, every fisherman, tumble their cargoes and even their ballast inside out and upside down, and if a penn'orth of pins is found unentered,⁶ let the whole be seized and confiscated. Thus shall the trade of your colonists suffer more from their friends in time of peace than it did from their enemies in war. Then let these boats' crews land upon every farm in their way, rob the orchards, steal the pigs and poultry, and insult the inhabitants. If the injured and exasperated farmers, unable to procure other justice, should attack the aggressors, drub [beat] them and burn their boats, you are to call this *high treason* and *rebellion*, order fleets and armies into their country and threaten to carry all the offenders three thousand miles [to Britain] to be hanged, drawn and quartered. *O! This will work admirably!*

treatment of fishermen, merchant shippers, and coastal farmers by customs officials in search of smugglers

⁵ As was done to the New York and Virginia assemblies.

⁶ If a penny's worth of pins (i.e., a tiny portion of the ship's cargo) is not listed on the required cargo inventory. Customs officials in the 1770s often used an incomplete cargo inventory as the basis for arresting merchants and/or seizing entire ship cargoes.

- XVI. If you are told of discontents in your colonies, never believe that they are general or that you have given occasion [cause] for them. Therefore do not think of applying any remedy or of changing any offensive measure. Redress no grievance lest they should be encouraged to demand the redress of some other grievance. Grant no request that is just and reasonable lest they should make another that is unreasonable. Take all your informations of the state of the colonies from your Governors and Officers in enmity with them. Encourage and reward these *leasing-makers*; secrete [keep secret] their lying accusations lest they should be confuted [refuted; proven wrong]; but act upon them as the clearest evidence and believe nothing you hear from the friends of the people. Suppose all *their* complaints to be invented and promoted by a few factious demagogues whom, if you could catch and hang, all would be quiet. Catch and hang a few of them accordingly, and the *blood of the Martyrs* shall work *miracles* in favor of your purpose.
- XVII. If you see *rival nations* rejoicing at the prospect of your disunion with your provinces and endeavoring to promote it; if they translate, publish and applaud all the complaints of your discontented colonists, at the same time privately stimulating you to severer measures; let not that *alarm* or offend you. Why should it? since you all mean *the same thing*.
- XVIII. If any colony should, at their own charge, erect a fortress to secure their port against the fleets of a foreign enemy, get your Governor to betray that fortress into your hands.⁷ Never think of paying what it cost the country for that would *look*, at least, like some regard for justice; but turn it into a citadel to awe the inhabitants and curb their commerce. If they should have lodged in such fortress the very arms they bought and used to aid you in your conquests, seize them all; it will provoke like *ingratitude* added to *robbery*. One admirable effect of these operations will be to discourage every other colony from erecting such defenses, and so your enemies may more easily invade them to the great disgrace of your government and, of course, *the furtherance of your project*.
- XIX. Send armies into their country under pretense of protecting the inhabitants, but instead of garrisoning the forts on their frontiers with those troops to prevent incursions, demolish those forts and order the troops into the heart of the country [so] that the savages may be encouraged to attack the frontiers and that the troops may be protected by the inhabitants. This will seem to proceed from your ill will or your ignorance, and contribute farther to produce and strengthen an opinion among them *that you are no longer fit to govern them*.
- XX. Lastly, invest the General of your army in the provinces with great and unconstitutional powers, and free him from the control of even your own Civil Governors. Let him have troops enough under his command, with all the fortresses in his possession, and who knows but (like some provincial Generals in the Roman empire, and encouraged by the universal discontent you have produced) he may take it into his head to set up for himself. If he should, and you have carefully practiced these few *excellent rules* of mine, take my word for it, all the provinces will immediately join him, and you will that day (if you have not done it sooner) get rid of the trouble of governing them and all the *plagues* attending their *commerce* and connection, from thenceforth and forever.

response to complaints and petitions for redress of grievances

response to other nations' support of colonies' resistance

takeover of forts, built by colonists, for British use against colonists

use of British troops in frontier regions

power & autonomy of chief military officer in colonies

Q. E. D.⁸

⁷ Referring to the fortress of Castle William in Boston harbor, taken over by General Gage for British use against the colonists.

⁸ *Quod erat demonstrandum*: Latin phrase ("which was to be demonstrated") often placed at the end of a philosophical argument; Franklin's pseudonymous signature for this essay.