



Benjamin Franklin

Letters on the Prospects for Reconciliation and the Beginning of War, 1775-1776

Franklin's letters to American and British friends during the critical transition years of 1775 and 1776 trace the last hopes of avoiding war with Britain and the fateful realization that the "outbreak of hostilities" in April 1775 had been, indeed, the outbreak of fullscale war, made official and irreversible in July 1776 with the adoption of the Declaration of Independence by the Second Continental Congress.

Franklin had lived in London for many years while serving as the colonial agent for several colonies and there developed friendships with members of Parliament, British military officers, and other British officials. To many of these men, his letters of 1775-76 express unchecked astonishment and condemnation of British actions.

The letters excerpted here begin less than a month after the Battle of Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775.

■ **8 MAY 1775.** Philadelphia.

To David Hartley, Member of Parliament, London.

You will have heard before this reaches you of the Commencement of a Civil War; the End of it perhaps neither myself nor you, who are much younger, may live to see. I find here all Ranks of People in Arms, disciplining¹ themselves Morning and Evening, and am informed that the firmest Union prevails throughout North America; New York as hearty as any of the rest.

■ **15 MAY 1775.** Philadelphia.

To Edmund Burke, Member of Parliament, London.

You will see by the Papers that Gen. Gage² call'd his Assembly to propose Lord North's pacific Plan,³ but before they could meet drew the Sword, and began the War.⁴ His Troops made a most vigorous Retreat, 20 Miles in 3 Hours, scarce to be parallell'd in History: the feeble Americans, who pelted them all the Way, could scarce keep up with them.

All People here feel themselves much oblig'd by your Endeavors to serve them.⁵ I hear your propos'd Resolves [to promote reconciliation] were negativ'd by a great Majority, which was denying the most notorious Truths and a kind of national Lying, of which they may be convicted by their own Records.

■ **16 MAY 1775.** Philadelphia.

To Joseph Priestley, theologian & scientist, London.

. . . You know it was said he [Gage] carried the sword in one hand and the olive branch in the other; and it seems he chose to give them a taste of the sword first. He is doubling his fortifications at Boston and hopes to secure his troops till succor [aid] arrives. The place indeed is naturally so defensible that I think them in no danger.

All America is exasperated by his conduct and more firmly united than ever. The breach between the two countries is grown wider and in danger of becoming irreparable.

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¹ I.e., men in military training with weapons.

² British military governor of Massachusetts.

³ British Prime Minister's reconciliation plan.

⁴ Battle of Lexington and Concord, 19 April 1775. I.e., the arduous trek of the embattled British army back to Boston from Lexington and Concord, as they were continually attacked and harassed by the American militiamen.

⁵ A respected British statesman, Burke had supported many of the American positions during the prerevolutionary period. Two months before this letter, Burke had delivered a speech before Parliament urging reconciliation with America (selections are presented in this collection in WAR #1).

- **23 MAY 1775.** Philadelphia. To Humphry Marshall, botanist, Pennsylvania.

I think, with you, that the non-importation and non-exportation,⁶ well adhered to, will end the controversy in our favor. But as Britain has begun to use force, it seems absolutely necessary that we should be prepared to repel force by force, which I think, united, we are well able to do.

It is a true old saying, that *make yourselves sheep and the wolves will eat you*: to which I may add another, *God helps them that help themselves*.

- **27 JUNE 1775.** Philadelphia. To John Sargent, Member of Parliament, London.

I have written to Messrs. Browns and Collinson to pay the Balance of my Acct. to you,⁷ and I beg you to take the Trouble of receiving and keeping it for me, or my Children. It may possibly soon be all I shall have left, as my American Property consists chiefly of House in our Seaport Towns, which your Ministry⁸ have begun to burn them all. It now requires great Wisdom on your Side [of] the Water to prevent a total Separation; I hope it will be found among you. We shall give you one Opportunity more of recovering our Affections and retaining the Connection, and that I fear will be the last.

- **5 JULY 1775.** Philadelphia. To William Strahan, Member of Parliament, London.

You are a Member of Parliament, and one of that Majority which has doomed my Country to Destruction. You have begun to burn our Towns and murder our People.⁹ Look upon your Hands! They are stained with the Blood of your Relations! You and I were long Friends: You are now my Enemy, and I am, Yours, B. Franklin.¹⁰ [See letter from Strahan to Franklin, 4 October 1775, on last page.]

- **12 SEPT. 1775.** Philadelphia. To David Hartley, Member of Parliament, London.

With this [letter] I send you a number of Newspapers and Pamphlets by which you will see Things are become serious here. Your Nation must stop short and change its Measures, or she will lose the Colonies forever. The Burning of Towns and firing from Men of War [warships] on defenseless Cities and Villages fill'd with Women and Children, the exciting the Indians to fall on our innocent Back[country] Settlers and our Slaves to murder their Masters,¹¹ are by no means Acts of a legitimate Government. They are of barbarous Tyranny and dissolve all Allegiance. The Insolence of your Captains of Men of War [warships] is intolerable. But we suppose they know whom they are to please.

- **13 SEPT. 1775.** Philadelphia. To Bishop Jonathan Shipley, Anglican clergyman, England.

Our united Wishes for a Reconciliation of the two Countries are not, I fear, soon to be accomplished, for I hear your Ministry are determin'd to persevere in their mad Measures, and here I find the firmest Determination to resist at all Hazards. The Event may be doubtful, but it is clear to me that if the Contest is only to be ended by our Submission, it will not be a short one. We have given up our Commerce — our last Ships, 34 Sail, left this Port the 9th Instant [of this month]: And in our Minds we give up our Sea Coast (tho' Part may be a little disputed) to the barbarous Ravages of your Ships of War; but the internal Country we shall defend. It is a good one and fruitful. It is, with our Liberties, worth defending, and it will itself by its Fertility enable us to defend it. Agriculture is the great Source

⁶ The resolutions to boycott British goods and to stop shipping American goods to Britain.

⁷ Sargent had been director of the Bank of England and was probably Franklin's banker in England. [The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, eds. Ellen Cohn, et al., Yale University Press]

⁸ I.e., the British government' "ministry" referring not to clergymen but to the king's cabinet including the Prime Minister.

⁹ By early July 1775, the battles of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill had been fought, and British forces had burned the town of Charlestown, Massachusetts, near Boston.

¹⁰ Franklin is using the standard form of concluding a letter — e.g., "I am ever, my dear friend, yours most affectionately" — to conclude this letter with the statement that Franklin and Strahan, longtime friends, are now political enemies.

¹¹ Britain offered slaves freedom if they joined the British army, thus fomenting rumors that they encouraged slaves to rebel and murder their owners.

of Wealth and Plenty. By cutting off our Trade you have thrown us *to the Earth*, whence like *Antaeus*¹² we shall rise yearly with fresh Strength and Vigor.

...

I am here immers'd in so much Business that I have scarce time to eat or sleep. The Winter I promise myself will bring with it some Relaxation. This Bustle is unsuitable to Age.¹³ How happy I was in the sweet Retirement of Twyford,¹⁴ where my only Business was a little Scribbling in the Garden Study and my Pleasure your Conversation, with that of your amiable Family!

■ **3 OCT. [?] 1775.** Philadelphia.

Extract of letter to unidentified correspondent, London; printed in *The London Chronicle*, Dec. 5-7, 1775.

Tell our good friend, Dr. P——e,¹⁵ not to be in any pains for us (because I remember he had his doubts). We are all firm and united. As I know he is a great calculator, I will give him some data to work upon. Ministry have made a campaign here, which has cost two millions. They have gained a mile of ground; they have lost half of it back again. They have lost fifteen hundred men, and killed one hundred and fifty Yankees. In the meantime we have had between sixty and seventy thousand children born. Ask him how long it will take for England to conquer America?

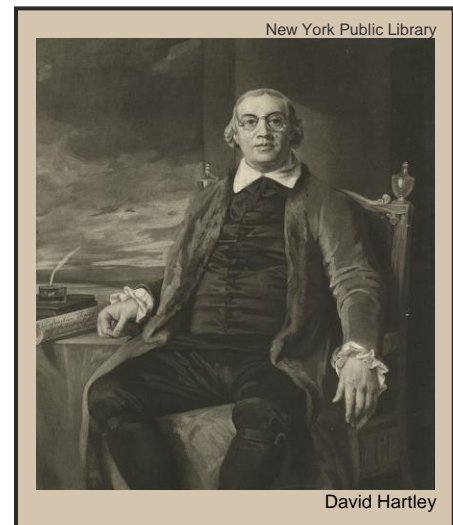
■ **3 OCT. 1775.** Philadelphia.

To David Hartley, Member of Parliament, London.

I wish as ardently as you can do for peace, and should rejoice exceedingly in cooperating with you to that end. But every ship from Britain brings some intelligence [news] of new measures that tend more and more to exasperate, and it seems to me that until you have found by dear experience the reducing [defeating] us by force impracticable, you will think of nothing fair and reasonable. We have as yet resolved only on defensive measures. If you would recall your forces and stay at home, we should meditate nothing to injure you. A little time so given for cooling on both sides would have excellent effects. But you will goad and provoke us. You despise us too much, and you are insensible of the Italian adage that *there is no little enemy*.

I am persuaded the body of the British people are our friends, but they are changeable, and by your lying Gazettes [newspapers] may soon be made our enemies. Our respect for them will proportionally diminish, and I see clearly we are on the high road to mutual enmity, hatred, and detestation. A separation will of course be inevitable. 'Tis a million of pities so fair a plan as we have hitherto been engaged in for increasing strength and empire with *public felicity* should be destroyed by the mangling hands of a few blundering ministers [British officials]. It will not be destroyed: God will protect and prosper it: You will only exclude yourselves from any share in it. We hear that more ships and troops are coming out. We know you may do us a great deal of mischief, but we are determined to bear it patiently as long as we can; but if you flatter yourselves with beating us into submission, you know neither the people nor the *country*.

The Congress is still sitting, and will wait the result of their *last* petition.¹⁶



¹² Antaeus: in Greek mythology, a giant and formidable wrestler whose strength left him when he lost contact with the ground. If thrown into the air, he would lose all strength until in contact again with the ground.

¹³ Born in January 1706, Franklin was nearly 70 years old when writing this letter to Shipley.

¹⁴ Shipley's country estate in England.

¹⁵ Perhaps Sir John Pringle, the king's physician, president of the Royal Society of London, and a longtime friend with whom Franklin shared thoughts on electricity and other aspects of science.

¹⁶ Olive Branch Petition, sent to the King three months earlier on July 5, 1775 (see CRISIS #8 in this collection).

■ **II FEB. 1776.** Philadelphia.

To Gen. Charles Lee, Continental Army, New York.

They still talk big in England and threaten hard, but their Language is somewhat civiler, at least not quite so disrespectful to us. By degree, they may come to their Senses, but too late I fancy for their Interest.

We have got in a large Quantity of Saltpetre¹⁷ 120 Ton, and 30 more expected. Powdermills are now wanting [lacking]. I believe we must set to work and make it by hand. But I still wish with you that Pikes [spears] could be introduc'd; and I would add Bows and Arrows. Those were good Weapons, not wisely laid aside. 1. Because a Man may shoot as truly with a Bow as with a common Musket. 2. He can discharge 4 Arrows in the time of charging and discharging one Bullet. 3. His Object is not taken from his View by the Smoke of his own Side. 4. A Flight of Arrows seen coming upon them terrifies, and disturbs the Enemy's Attention to his Business. 5. An Arrow sticking in any Part of a Man, puts him *hors du Combat* [out of combat] 'till 'tis extracted. 6. Bows and Arrows are more easily provided everywhere than Muskets and Ammunition.

...

There is a kind of Suspense in Men's Minds here at present, waiting to see what Terms will be offer'd from England. I expect none that we can accept; and when that is generally seen, we shall be more unanimous and more decisive. Then your propos'd solemn League and Covenant¹⁸ will go better down, and perhaps most of your other strong Measures adopted.

I am always glad to hear from you, but I don't deserve your Favors [letters] being so bad a Correspondent. My Eyes will now hardly serve me to write by Night, and these short Days have been all taken up by such Variety of Business that I seldom can sit down three Minutes without Interruption.

■ **29 MARCH 1776.** New York.

To Anthony Todd, British Postmaster General, England.

Being here in my Way to Canada¹⁹ and understanding that your Packet [mail boat] sails tomorrow, I take the Opportunity of sending a Line or two to some Friends; among the rest give me leave to salute you with my warmest Wishes for your Health and Prosperity.

I shall write Politics to none of them but to you. How long will the *Insanity* on your side the Water continue? Every Day's Plundering of our Property and Burning our Habitations serves but to exasperate and unite us the more. The Breach between you and us grows daily wider and more difficult to heal. Britain without us can grow no stronger: Without her we shall become a tenfold greater and mightier People. Do you choose to have so increasing a Nation of Enemies? Do you think it prudent by your Barbarities to fix us in a rooted Hatred of your Nation and make all our innumerable Posterity detest you? Yet this is the Way in which you are now proceeding.

written in margin:

Is anybody among you weak enough to imagine that these Mischiefs are neither to be paid for, nor revenged?

Our Primers begin to be printed with Cuts²⁰ of the Burnings of Charlestown, of Falmouth, of James Town, of Norfolk, with the Flight of Women and Children from these defenseless Places, some Falling by Shot in their Flight. Allen and his People, with Lovell,²¹ an amiable Character and a Man of

¹⁷ Saltpetre: potassium nitrate, used in making gunpowder.

¹⁸ Perhaps referring to the proposed Articles of Confederation, which differed from Franklin's 1775 proposed confederacy.

¹⁹ Franklin went to Canada with three other delegates of the Continental Congress in an unsuccessful attempt to gain Canada's participation in the war against Britain.

²⁰ I.e., our schoolbooks are beginning to include woodcuts depicting the burning of American towns by the British.

²¹ Ethan Allen and James Lovell in Allen's Green Mountain Boys, imprisoned by the British after the Continental Army's failed attack on Montreal, Canada in September 1775.



Letters! all in Chains on board your Ships, while we treat your People that are our Prisoners with the utmost Kindness and Humanity. Your Ministers [British cabinet] may imagine that we shall soon be tired of this and submit. But they are mistaken, as you may recollect they have been hitherto in every Instance in which I told you at the time that they were mistaken. And I now venture to tell you that tho' this War may be a long one (and I think it will probably last beyond my Time) we shall with God's Help finally get the better of you. The Consequences I leave to your Imagination.

...

Since writing the above I have been riding round the [out]Skirts of this Town to view the Works;²² they are but lately begun but prodigiously forward, all Ranks of People working at them as Volunteers with the greatest Alacrity and without Pay to have them ready for the Reception of Gen. Howe [British general], who having finish'd his Visit to Boston is daily expected here. What will you do with this Spirit? You can have no Conception of Merchants and Gentlemen working with Spades and Wheelbarrows among Porters and Negroes: I suppose you will scarce believe it.

■ **15 APRIL 1776.** Saratoga, New York. To Col. Josiah Quincy (Sr.), near Boston, Massachusetts.

I am here on my Way to Canada, detain'd by the present State of the Lakes, in which the unthaw'd Ice obstructs Navigation. I begin to apprehend that I have undertaken a Fatigue that at my Time of Life may prove too much for me, so I sit down to write to a few Friends by way of Farewell.²³

I congratulate you on the Departure of your late troublesome Neighbors.²⁴ I hope your Country [colony] will now for some time have Rest, and that Care will be taken so to fortify Boston as that no Force shall be able again to get Footing there.

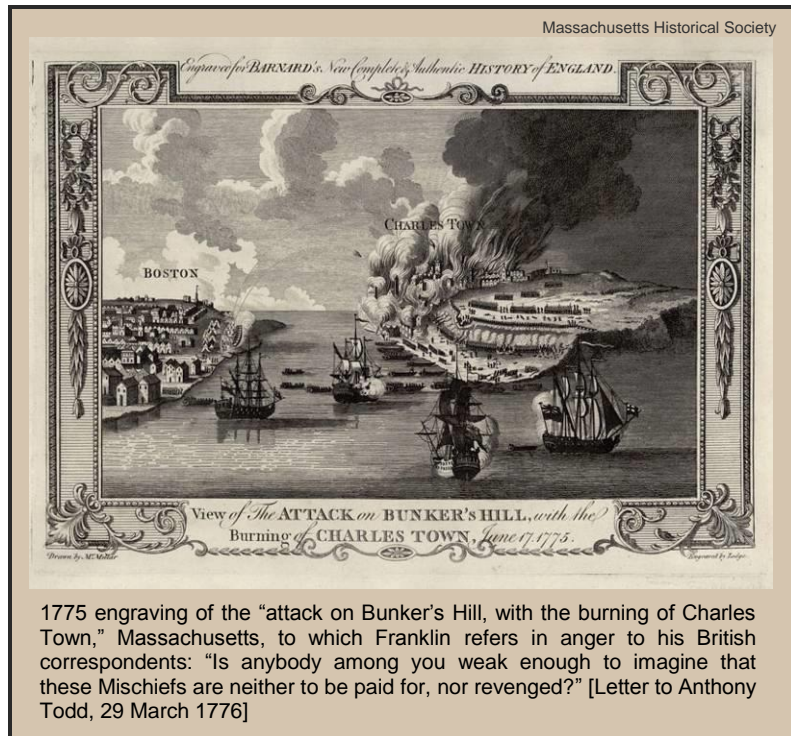
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You ask, "When is the Continental Congress by general Consent to be formed into a supreme Legislative, Alliances defensive and offensive formed, our Ports opened, and a formidable naval Force established at the Public Charge?" I can only answer at present that nothing seems wanting but that "general Consent." The Novelty of the Thing deters some, the Doubt of Success others, the vain Hope of Reconciliation many. But our Enemies take continually every proper Measure to remove these Obstacles, and their Endeavors are attended with Success since every Day furnishes us with new Causes of increasing Enmity and new Reasons for wishing an eternal Separation, so that there is a rapid Increase of the formerly small Party who were for an independent Government.

²² Breastworks: defensive fortifications, usually of mounded earth, built to chest height.

²³ Franklin became very ill on the arduous journey through New York to Canada.

²⁴ The British evacuated Boston in March 1776 after an eleven-month siege which had begun immediately after the Battle of Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775.



1775 engraving of the "attack on Bunker's Hill, with the burning of Charles Town," Massachusetts, to which Franklin refers in anger to his British correspondents: "Is anybody among you weak enough to imagine that these Mischiefs are neither to be paid for, nor revenged?" [Letter to Anthony Todd, 29 March 1776]

■ **21 JUNE 1776.** Philadelphia. [draft]

To Gen. George Washington.
Commander in Chief, Continental Army.

. . . I see more certainly the Ruin of Britain if she persists in such expensive distant Expeditions, which will probably prove more disastrous to her than anciently her Wars in the Holy Land.

I return Gen. Sullivan's²⁵ Letter enclos'd: Am glad to find him in such Spirits and that the Canadians are returning to their Regard for us. I am just recovering from a severe Fit of the Gout, which has kept me from Congress and Company almost ever since you left us, so that I know little of what has pass'd there, except that a Declaration of Independence is preparing.²⁶

■ **20 JULY 1776.** Philadelphia.

To Admiral Sir Richard Howe.
Commander of the British Navy in America.²⁷

. . . It is impossible we should think of Submission to a Government that has, with the most wanton Barbarity and Cruelty, burnt our defenseless Towns in the midst of Winter, excited the Savages to massacre our Farmers, and our Slaves to murder their Masters, and is even now bringing foreign Mercenaries²⁸ to deluge our Settlements with Blood. These atrocious Injuries have extinguished every remaining Spark of Affection for that Parent Country we once held so dear: But were it possible for *us* to forget and forgive them, it is not possible for *you* (I mean the British Nation) to forgive the People you have so heavily injured. You can never confide again in those as Fellow Subjects and permit them to enjoy equal Freedom, to whom you know you have given such just Cause of lasting Enmity. And this must impel you, were we again under your Government, to endeavor the breaking our Spirit by the severest Tyranny, and obstructing by every means in your Power our growing Strength and Prosperity.

. . .

Long did I endeavor with unfeigned and unwearied Zeal to preserve from breaking that fine and noble China Vase, the British Empire: for I knew that being once broken, the separate Parts could not retain even their Share of the Strength or Value that existed in the Whole, and that a perfect Re-Union of those Parts could scarce even be hoped for. Your Lordship may possibly remember the Tears of Joy that wet my Cheek when, at your good Sister's in London, you once gave me Expectations that a Reconciliation might soon take place. I had the Misfortune to find those Expectations disappointed, and to be treated as the Cause of the Mischief I was laboring to prevent.

Franklin's Correspondents
in these selections

AMERICAN

Rev. Samuel Cooper
Gen. Charles Lee
Humphry Marshall
Col. Josiah Quincy
Gen. George Washington
Col. Anthony Wayne

BRITISH

Edmund Burke, M.P.*
David Hartley, M.P.
Admiral Richard Howe
Joseph Priestley
John Sargent, M.P.
Rev. Jonathan Shipley
William Strahan, M.P.
Anthony Todd
Postmaster General
Unidentified correspondent

*Member of Parliament

■ **28 AUGUST 1776.** Philadelphia.

To Col. Anthony Wayne, 4th Pennsylvania Regiment.

I have received two of your Favors [letters], which were immediately communicated to the Board of War, who are a Committee of Congress appointed to take Care of everything in that Department, and who will I make no doubt take the necessary Measures for supplying your Wants. But as America is new in the Business of Providing for Armies, there must be for a time Deficiencies that are very inconvenient to the Troops, and which Experience only can bring us into the Mode of Preventing. I am pleas'd to find your People bear them with a Soldierly Spirit, and I hope they will soon be remedied.

²⁵ General John Sullivan. appointed that month as commander of Continental troops in Canada.

²⁶ Adopted thirteen days later, on July 4, 1776, by the Continental Congress in Philadelphia.

²⁷ Admiral Sir Richard Howe and his brother, General Sir William Howe, commander of the British land forces in America, served on a commission appointed a month later by the Continental Congress to pursue reconciliation with Britain.

²⁸ Hessian (German) soldiers recruited to fight in the British army.

A general Action is every day expected at New York. If the Enemy is beaten, it will probably be decisive as to them, for they can hardly produce such another Armament for another Campaign: But our growing Country can bear considerable Losses and recover them, so that a Defeat on our part will not by any means occasion our giving up the Cause. Much depends on the Bravery of you who are posted at Ticonderoga. If you prevent the Junction of the two Armies, their Project for this Year will be broken, and the Credit of the British Arms thro'out Europe and of the Ministry in England will be demolish'd, and the Nation grow sick of the Contest.

I am much oblig'd by your Draft of the Situation of our Troops, and of the Defenses. I pray heartily for your Success, not doubting you will deserve it.

The greatest Unanimity continues in the Congress. The Convention of this Province is sitting, engag'd in framing a new Government. The greatest Part of our Militia are in New Jersey. Arms and Ammunition are daily arriving, the French Government having resolv'd to wink at the Supplying of us: So that in another Year our People throughout the Continent will be both better arm'd and better disciplin'd, as most of them will have some Experience of a Camp Life and actual Service.

■ **25 OCTOBER 1776.** Philadelphia. To Rev. Samuel Cooper, Congregational clergyman, Boston.

Being once more order'd to Europe,²⁹ and to embark this day, I write this Line &c.

As to our public Affairs, I hope our People will keep up their Courage. I have no Doubt of their finally succeeding by the Blessing of God, nor have I any Doubt that so good a Cause will fail of that Blessing. It is computed here that we have already taken a Million [English pounds] Sterling from the Enemy. They must soon be sick of their piratical Project. No Time should be lost in fortifying three or four Ports on our extended Coast as strong as Art [skill] and Expense can make them: Nothing will give us greater Weight and Importance in the Eyes of the Commercial States [countries] than a Conviction that we can annoy, on Occasion, their Trade, and carry our Prizes into safe Harbors; and whatever Expense we are at in such fortifying will be soon repaid by the Encouragement and Success of Privateering.

___Reply from William Strahan, London, to Franklin, Philadelphia, 4 October 1775 [see p. 2]___

. . . It was indeed no difficult Matter for You to prophecy in the year 1769 much of what has since happened, as you had it so much in your own Power to fulfill that Prophecy. But I am greatly afraid you have carried Things too far, and I am persuaded you will find it so ere long. You are now, I am very sorry to see it, in the Evening of Life embark'd in the most arduous, most dangerous and most uncertain Task that ever Man engaged in, where Difficulties will of course succeed Difficulties; where various Interests will clash against one another, perhaps unseen; where the Humours of a great Body of People are to be attended to, and if possible, reconciled to the great Plan of Operations; and where the Ambition of a single Individual may, at length, in one Moment overturn that System of Liberty you are now contending.

All these you may say are the idle Fears of a Man who has not Judgment or Capacity of Mind to judge of so vast an Undertaking. It may be so, and therefore I shall not trouble you farther upon the Subject than just to tell you once more after all that is past, that I am still of Opinion that the Ministry of this Country was never disposed to fleece or oppress you, that this unnatural Civil War has been chiefly, if not wholly, occasioned by our wicked Factions at Home, whose Struggles for Places and Power have by degrees carried them such daring Lengths, as have induced and encouraged you to increase your Demands much beyond what you at first dreamt of. . . . In short I see no End to the Public Calamities attending this Quarrel, tho' your present Unanimity may seem to you to promise a speedy Issue to the Dispute.

²⁹ Franklin sailed to France as a delegate of Congress to negotiate a French alliance with the United States, achieved in February 1778 after the American victory at Saratoga, New York. See Memoir, this page.