



When I say such an Union is impossible, I mean
without the most grievous Tyranny and Oppression.

__Observations on the disunity of the American colonies, 1722-1764__

One downside of the thirteen colonies' relative autonomy within the empire was just that—there were thirteen of them. Thirteen different charters, histories, identities, and decades-long habits of dealing with each other and with Great Britain. If threatened by a common enemy, would they unite? No.

The issue became critical in 1754 with the fourth imperial war in North America—the French and Indian War. The British, penned in along the Atlantic seacoast by the French and Spanish, eyed western expansion more than ever. The French, committed to protecting its commercial dominance in fish and furs (especially in the Mississippi River valley), had no intention of losing land to the British. Each bolstered its defenses by building new forts and strengthening Indian alliances along their mutual boundaries. With early victories by the French, including the defeat of George Washington's troops at Fort Necessity in Pennsylvania (near present-day Pittsburgh), colonial representatives met to design a colonial union for mutual defense. Would the colonies accept it? No. Presented here are ten observations by Englishmen and colonists, including Benjamin Franklin (quoted above), on the disunity of the colonies in the prerevolutionary period. What *could* cause the colonies to unite, according to these observers?

1722 “these Absurdities and Inconveniencies”

An Englishman, whose plans for a colony in the lower Mississippi River valley never materialized, urges a union of the colonies for the defense of their western lands.

It is well known that the *Frontiers* of our *Colonies* are large, naked, and open, there being scarce any *Forts* or *Garrisons* to defend them for near *Two Thousand Miles*. The dwellings of the *Inhabitants* are scattering and at a Distance from one another, and it's almost impossible according to the present *Establishment* and *Situation* of our *Affairs* there, from the great *Number* of our *Colonies* independent on each other, their different Sorts of *Governments*, *Views*, and *Interests*, to draw any considerable *Body* of *Forces* together on an *Emergency*, through the *Safety* and *Preservation* not only of any particular *Colony* but of all the *English Plantations* on the *Continent* . . .

The only *Expedient* I can at present think of, or shall presume to mention (with the utmost *Deference* to His MAJESTY and his Ministers) to help and obviate these *Absurdities* and *Inconveniencies*, and apply a *Remedy* to them, is, That All the *Colonies* apertaining to the Crown of GREAT BRITAIN on the *Northern Continent* of *America* be United under a *Legal, Regular*, and firm *Establishment*, over which it's propos'd a *Lieutenant* or *Supreme Governour* may be constituted and appointed to *Preside* on the *Spot*, to whom the *Governours* of each *Colony* shall be *Subordinate*. . . .

. . . So if the *English Colonies* in *America* were Consolidated as one *Body* and join'd in one *Common Interest*, as they are under one *Gracious Sovereign*, and with united *Forces* were ready and willing to act in *Concert* and assist each other, they would be better enabled to provide for and defend themselves against any troublesome *Ambitious Neighbour* or bold *Invader*.

Daniel Coxe, *A Description of the English Province of Carolana* . . . , 1722¹

National Humanities Center, 2009: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. Spelling and punctuation modernized by NHC for clarity. Statement at top of page from Benjamin Franklin, *The Interest of Great Britain Considered*, 1760, p. 42, accessed through Early American Imprints online, American Antiquarian Society; permission pending. Permission pending for texts from The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, eds. Leonard W. Labaree et al. (Yale University Press, 1959–). Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/imagecredits.htm.

¹ Coxe, *Description* (London, 1722); facsimile reproduction by University Presses of Florida, 1976; permission pending.

1749 “each . . . is independent of the other”

A visiting Swedish botanist notes the potential dire consequences of the colonies’ refusal to unify for their mutual defense instead of “quarrelling” about funds and tactics.

. . . For it is to be observed that each English colony in North America is independent of the other, and that each has its own laws and coinage, and may be looked upon in several lights as a state by itself. Hence it happens that in time of war things go on very slowly and irregularly here; for not only the opinion of one province is sometimes directly opposite to that of another, but frequently the views of the governor and those of the assembly of the same province are quite different; so that it is easy to see that, while the people are quarrelling about the best and cheapest manner of carrying on the war, an enemy has it in his power to take one place after another. It has usually happened that while some provinces have been suffering from their enemies, the neighboring ones have been quiet and inactive, as if it did not in the least concern them.

Peter Kalm, *Travels into North America* [1749-1750], English ed., 1770²

1751 “six Nations of ignorant Savages”

Benjamin Franklin mourns the colonies’ failure to unify for mutual defense—an achievement sustained by the “ignorant” Iroquois.

A voluntary Union entered into by the Colonies themselves, I think, would be preferable to one impos’d by Parliament; for it would be perhaps not much more difficult to procure, and more easy to alter and improve, as Circumstances should require, and Experience direct. It would be a very strange Thing, 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 Ages and appears indissoluble; and yet that 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 [lack] an equal Understanding of their Interests.

Benjamin Franklin, Philadelphia, Letter to James Parker, 20 March 1751³

1754 “this Union is hardly to be expected”

A Boston physician predicts that France will become the “sole Masters of this Continent” if the colonies fail to unify for mutual defense,

. . . For my own part, I cannot help thinking that unless there be a united and vigorous opposition of the English Colonies to them, the French are laying a solid Foundation for being, some time or other, sole Masters of this Continent, notwithstanding our present Superiority to them in point of Numbers. But this Union is hardly to be expected to be brought about by any confederacy or voluntary Agreement among ourselves. The Jealousies the Colonies have of each other with regard to their real or imaginary different Interests, &c. will effectually hinder anything of this kind from taking place. But were everything else to be got over, we should never agree about the Form of the Union, or who should have the execution of the Articles of it. So that however necessary a Step this may be for the mutual Safety and preservation of these Colonies, it is pretty certain it will never be taken unless we are forced to it by the Supreme Authority of the Nation.

William Clarke, Boston, Massachusetts, Letter to Benjamin Franklin, Philadelphia, 6 May 1754⁴

² Peter Kalm, *Travels into North America* [1748-1749], *Containing its Natural History, and a Circumstantial Account of Its Plantations and Agriculture in General . . .*, English ed., 1770, Vol. I, pp. 139-140 (facsimile reprint: Dover Publications, 1966; replication of Wilson-Erickson publication, 1937); permission pending.

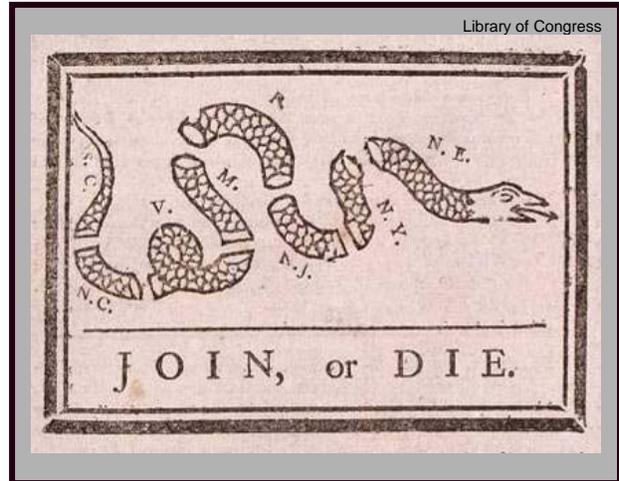
³ Printed in [Archibald Kennedy], *The Importance of Gaining and Preserving the Friendship of the Indians to the British Interest, Considered* (New York, 1751), pp. 27-31; in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, eds. Leonard W. Labaree et al. (Yale University Press, 1959–), #622938.

⁴ *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, eds. Leonard W. Labaree et al. (Yale University Press, 1959–), #623187.

1754 “destruction of the British Interest”

In comments accompanying his famous “Join, or Die” cartoon, Franklin warns of dire consequences if the colonies fail to unite against the French and their Indian allies on the western frontier lands.

. . . The Confidence of the French in this Undertaking seems well-grounded on the present disunited State of the British Colonies, and the extreme Difficulty of bringing so many different Governments and Assemblies to agree in any speedy and effectual Measures for our common Defense and Security, while our Enemies have the very great Advantage of being under one Direction, with one Council, and one Purse. Hence, and from the great Distance of Britain, they presume that they may with Impunity violate the most solemn Treaties subsisting between the two Crowns, kill, seize and imprison our Traders, and confiscate their Effects at Pleasure (as they have done for several Years past), murder and scalp our Farmers with their Wives and Children, and take an easy Possession of such Parts of the British Territory as they find most convenient for them; which if they are permitted to do, must end in the Destruction of the British Interest, Trade and Plantations in America.



Benjamin Franklin, editorial and cartoon, *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, 9 May 1754⁵

1754 “Plan of a Proposed Union”

Representatives from seven colonies meet in Albany, New York, to devise a union for mutual defense, but the “Albany Plan of Union,” proposed by Franklin and adopted by the representatives, is rejected by the colonies and the British Board of Trade.

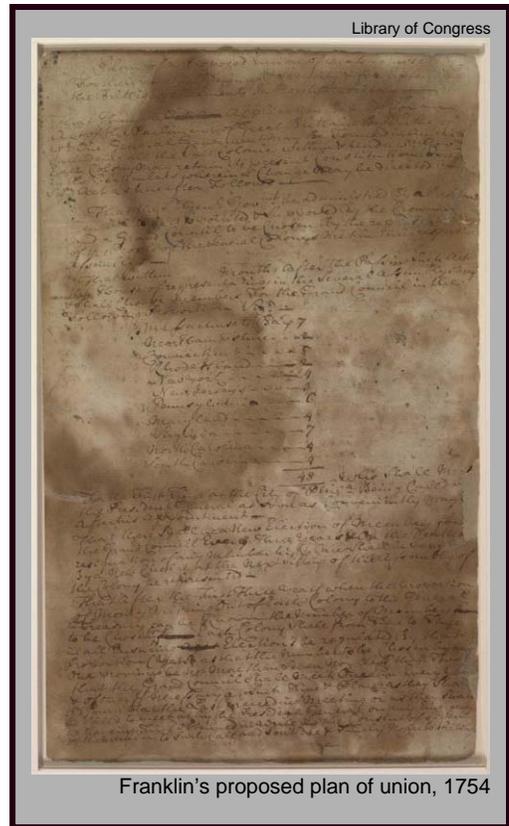
It is proposed that humble application be made for an act of Parliament of Great Britain, by virtue of which one general government may be formed in America, including all the said colonies, within and under which government each colony may retain its present constitution, except in the particulars wherein 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	Pennsylvania	6
New Hampshire	2	Maryland	4
Connecticut	5	Virginia	7
Rhode Island	2	North Carolina	4
New York	4	South Carolina	4
New Jersey	3		

⁵ Editorial as mailed to Richard Partridge, May 1754; *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, #623189.

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 . . .
6. That the Grand Council shall meet once in every year, and oftener if occasion require . . . 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 . . .
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 . . .
13. That they make new settlements on such purchases, by granting lands in the King's name . . .
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 defense 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 [draft] 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) . . .
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.
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 . . .
25. That the particular military as well as civil establishments in each Colony remain in their present state . . . 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.



Benjamin Franklin, Albany Plan of Union, as adopted by the Albany Congress, 10 July 1754; excerpts⁶

⁶ The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, #623208.

1754 “Reasons against partial Unions”

Franklin explains why the Albany Congress rejected proposals for two to three separate unions of colonies instead of one central union.

It was proposed by some of the Commissioners to form the colonies into two or three distinct unions; but for these reasons that proposal was dropped even by those that made it; [viz.]

1. In all cases where the strength of the whole was necessary to be used against the enemy, there would be the same difficulty in degree to bring the several unions to unite together, as now the several colonies; and consequently the same delays on our part and advantage to the enemy.
2. Each union would separately be weaker than when joined by the whole, obliged to exert more force, be more oppressed by the expense, and the enemy less deterred from attacking it.
3. Where particular colonies have *selfish views*, as New York with regard to Indian trade and lands, or are *less exposed*, being covered by others, as New Jersey, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Maryland, or have *particular whims and prejudices* against warlike measures in general, as Pennsylvania, where the Quakers predominate, such colonies would have more weight in a partial union and be better able to oppose and obstruct the measures necessary for the general good than where they are swallowed up in the general union.
4. The Indian trade would be better regulated by the union of the whole than by partial unions. And as Canada is chiefly supported by that trade, if it could be drawn into the hands of the English (as it might be if the Indians were supplied on moderate terms, and by honest traders appointed by and acting for the public) that alone would contribute greatly to the weakening of our enemies.
5. The establishing of new colonies westward on the Ohio and the lakes (a matter of considerable importance to the increase of British trade and power, to the breaking that of the French, and to the protection and security of our present colonies,) would best be carried on by a joint union.
6. It was also thought that by the frequent meetings-together of commissioners or representatives from all the colonies, the circumstances of the whole would be better known, and the good of the whole better provided for; and that the colonies would by this connection learn to consider themselves, not as so many independent states, but as members of the same body, and thence be more ready to afford assistance and support to each other and to make diversions in favour even of the most distant, and to join cordially in any expedition for the benefit of all against the common enemy.

Benjamin Franklin, Reasons and Motives for the Albany Plan of Union, unpublished manuscript, July 1754⁷

1760 “there would soon be a civil war”

An Englishman travelling through the colonies notes their “insuperable causes of weakness,” especially their mutual distrust and animosity.

An idea, strange as it is visionary, has entered into the minds of the generality of mankind that empire is traveling westward, and everyone is looking forward with eager and impatient expectation to that destined moment when America is to give law to the rest of the world. But if ever an idea was illusory and fallacious, I will venture to predict that this will be so.

America is formed for happiness, but not for empire. In a course of 1200 miles I did not see a single object that solicited charity; but I saw insuperable causes of weakness, which will necessarily prevent its being a potent state. . . .

The colonies, therefore, separately considered, are internally weak; but it may be supposed that by an union or coalition they would become strong and formidable. But an union seems almost impossible —

⁷ Manuscript not found; printed in Benjamin Vaughan, ed., *Political, Miscellaneous, and Philosophical Pieces; ... Written by Benj. Franklin, LL.D. and F.R.S.* (London, 1779), pp. 85-119; reprinted in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, #623213.

one founded in dominion or power is morally so, for were not England to interfere, the colonies themselves so well understand the policy of preserving a balance that, I think, they would not be idle spectators, were any one of them to endeavour to subjugate its next neighbour. Indeed, it appears to me a very doubtful point, even supposing all the colonies of America to be united under one head, whether it would be possible to keep in due order and government so wide and extended an empire, the difficulties of communication, of intercourse, of correspondence, and all other circumstances considered.

A voluntary association or coalition, at least a permanent one, is almost as difficult to be supposed, for fire and water are not more heterogeneous than the different colonies in North-America. Nothing can exceed the jealousy and emulation which they possess in regard to each other. The inhabitants of Pennsylvania and New York have an inexhaustible source of animosity in their jealousy for the trade of the Jerseys. Massachusetts-Bay and Rhode Island are not less interested in that of Connecticut. The West Indies are a common subject of emulation to them all. Even the limits and boundaries of each colony are a constant source of litigation. In short, such is the difference of character, of manners, of religion, of interest, of the different colonies, that I think, if I am not wholly ignorant of the human mind, were they left to themselves, there would soon be a civil war from one end of the continent to the other; while the Indians and Negroes would, with better reason, impatiently watch the opportunity of exterminating them all together.

Andrew Burnaby, *Travels through the Middle Settlements in North-America. In the Years 1759 and 1760, 1775*⁸

1760 “not merely improbable, it is impossible”

Franklin concludes there is little danger of the colonies uniting for independence — unless Britain threatens their civil and religious liberties.

[The colonies'] Jealousy of each other is so great that 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. Nothing but the immediate Command of the Crown has been able to produce even the imperfect Union but lately seen there of the Forces of some Colonies. If they could not agree to unite for their Defense against the *French* and *Indians* who were perpetually harassing their Settlements, burning their Villages, and murdering their People, can it reasonably be supposed there is any Danger of their uniting against their own Nation, which protects and encourages them, with which they have so many Connections and ties of Blood, Interest and Affection, and which it is well known they all love much more than they love one another? In short, there are so many Causes that must operate to prevent it that I will venture to say, an Union amongst them for such a Purpose is not merely improbable, it is impossible; and if the Union of the whole is impossible, the Attempt of a part must be Madness, as those Colonies that did not join the Rebellion would join the Mother Country in suppressing it.

When I say such an Union is impossible, I mean without the most grievous Tyranny and Oppression. People who have Property in a country which they may lose, and Privileges which they may endanger; are generally dispos'd to be quiet and even to bear much rather than hazard all. While the Government is mild and just, while important civil and religious Rights are secure, such subjects will be dutiful and obedient. The Waves do not rise but when the Winds blow.

Benjamin Franklin, *The Interest of Great Britain Considered, With Regard to Her Colonies . . .*, 1760⁹

⁸ Burnaby, *Travels*, facsimile of 3d. ed., 1798; by Augustus M. Kelley, Publishers, New York, 1970; permission pending.

⁹ 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, at Tully's Head, near Surry-Street in the Strand, 1760); accessed through Early American Imprints online, American Antiquarian Society; permission pending.

1764 *“rivalship and jealousies which arise”*

An Englishman and former royal governor of several colonies advises Great Britain to keep the colonies “disconnected.”

. . . [I]t is essential to the preservation of the empire to keep [the colonies] disconnected and independent of each other. They are certainly so at present — the different manner in which they are settled, the different modes under which they live, the different forms of charters, grants, and frame of government they possess, the various principles of repulsion — that these create the different interests which they actuate, the religious interests by which they are actuated, the rivalship and jealousies which arise from hence, and the impracticability, if not the impossibility of reconciling and accommodating these incompatible ideas and claims, will keep them forever so. . .

Gov. Thomas Pownall, *The Administration of the Colonies*, 1764¹⁰

POSTSCRIPT

Franklin’s Observations on the Albany Plan of Union after the American Revolution

. . . I am still of opinion it would have been happy for both sides the water [of the ocean] if it had been adopted. The colonies, so united, would have been sufficiently strong to have defended themselves; there would then have been no need of troops from England. Of course, the subsequent pretense 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 and princes.

Look round the habitable world, how few
Know their own good, or, knowing it, pursue!¹¹

Those who govern, having much business on their hands, do not generally like to take the trouble of considering and carrying into execution new projects. The best public measures are therefore seldom *adopted from previous wisdom, but forc’d by the occasion.*

Autobiography, third section, written 1788¹²

On Reflection it now seems probable, that if the foregoing Plan or something like it had been adopted and carried into Execution, the subsequent Separation of the Colonies from the Mother Country might not so soon have happened, nor the Mischiefs suffered on both sides have occurred, perhaps during another Century. For the Colonies, if so united, would have really been, as they then thought themselves, sufficient to their own Defense, and being trusted with it, as by the Plan, an Army from Britain, for that purpose would have been unnecessary: The Pretenses for framing the Stamp-Act would then not have existed, nor the other Projects for drawing a Revenue from America to Britain by Acts of Parliament, which were the Cause of the Breach, and attended with such terrible Expense of Blood and Treasure, so that the different Parts of the Empire might still have remained in Peace and Union.

Unpublished remark, 9 February 1789¹³

¹⁰ Pownall *Administration* accessed through Early American Imprints online, American Antiquarian Society; permission pending.

¹¹ Juvenal (Roman poet), *Satires* X, 1.1 (as translated by the English poet John Dryden).

¹² Franklin, *Autobiography*, written 1771, 1774-1775, 1788; first published in English, 1793.

¹³ The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, #644373.