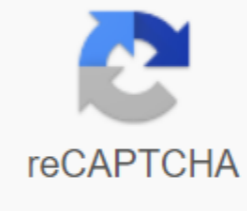




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A fascinating story about Franklin's various and extraordinary achievements... A fascinating one-volume review of Franklin, which should be on the reading list of those interested in the years leading up to and immediately after the founding of our country. -Bob Van Brocklin, Sunday Oregonian Isaacson's vivid and readable narrative gives a clear account of Franklin's scientific work, his extraordinary career as a social innovator, his writings as a diplomat and statesman, and the vagaries of his love life. -Robin Blackburn, nation invigorating . . . A fresh and organic story about Franklin's life... Isaacson's narration is lively, thoroughly researched and well-developed, easily moving from science and philosophy to the frivolity of Franklin's Parisian years to its famous hundredth humor. -David Takami, Seattle Times With his exhaustive research, set out in a simple and readable manner, with its comprehensive applications His many insightful and surprising conclusions about his subject and his era, Isaacson's book is extremely useful as an important study for those interested in the dawn of the American mind. -Charlie Mount, Forbes Walter Isaacson understands that spin is the essence of Franklin, and so in his extremely read new biography he builds his portrait around the skills of a great diplomat for myth-making and subterfuge. This is not a revisionist biography, but a celebratory one depicting Franklin as, among other things, America's first public relations genius... An irreplaceable and very interesting addition to the long afterlife of Benjamin Franklin. -John Freeman, Cleveland Plain dealer Isaacson produced an entertaining, compassionate, and evenhanded glimpse into the mind and life of our most representative founding father . . . Settle down with a copy of his biography of Franklin and rediscover what being an American is really all about. - Dorman T. Schindler, Denver Post Franklin is the centerpiece, and he couldn't be more alive, accessible, practical and winking. -Patrick Beach, Austin U.S.-State Persuasive . . . Isaacson is an experienced writer and he tells a wonderful story. The book is abundantly researched, but she wears her scholarship easily. The writing, whether about diplomatic negotiations or scientific experiments, is clear, straightforward, and even humorous-touch Franklin would appreciate. Scientists and non-professional readers will appreciate this nuance and thoughtful volume. Terry W. Hartle, The Christian Science Monitor's Benjamin Franklin, was the most experienced man of his age. This is the meaning of Walter Isaacson's excellently written and most executed account and assessment of this man. He said with great pleasure, facts that have a purpose and a point, anecdotes that are revealing and reliable. As poor Richard might have said: Only the truly great among us deserve a really great book about us. Both Isaacson's subject and the book meet this test. Jim Lehrer has thoroughly researched and clearly ... This balanced assessment of Franklin explores his flaws as well as his successes. Warts and the whole approach to Franklin's life humanizes the person, not reduces it . . . Wonderful book... Final. -Mark Horton, Edmonton (Alberta) Magazine Attraction . . . The importance of Franklin as a scientist is likely to be a revelation to readers who think of him as a kite-flying dabbler . . . Written in lively, colloquial prose, Benjamin Franklin will appeal to the same great body of readers who made John Adams David McCullough a huge bestseller. Like this book, it transforms marble people into figures of flesh and blood, complex and admirable, if hardly perfect... Good reading. - Fritz Lanham, Houston Chronicle Superb. Isaacson has a keen eye genius man whose fingerprints lie everywhere in our history. -Publishers Weekly (Star) Kissinger: Biography of The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made (with Evan Thomas) Pro and Con CONTENTS Chapter ONE Benjamin Franklin and The Invention of America Chapter Two Pilgrim Progress: Boston, 1706-1723 Chapter THREE Traveler: Philadelphia and London, 1723-1726 Chapter Four Prints: Philadelphia, 1726-1732 Chapter FIVE Public Citizen: Philadelphia, 1731-1748 Chapter SIX Scientist and Inventor: Philadelphia, 1744-1751 Chapter SEVEN Politician : Philadelphia, 1749-1756 Chapter EIGHT Troubled Waters: London, 1757-1762 Chapter NINE Home Leave: Philadelphia, 1763-1764 CHAPTER TEN Agent: London, 1765-1770 CHAPTER ELEVEN REBEL: London, 1771-1775 WORLD 1775-1776 Chapter THIRTEEN Courtier: Paris, 1776-1778 Chapter4 Bon Vivant: Paris, 1778-1785 CHAPTER FIFTEEN Peacemaker: Paris, 1778-1785 · Philadelphia, 1785-1790 Chapter SEVENTEEN Epilogue CHAPTER EIGHTEEN Conclusions Cast Characters Currency Transformation Confessions Sources and Abbreviations Photos Of Author Illustration Credits Note on Type Notes Index Katie and Betsy as always . . . Head ONE BENJAMIN FRANKLIN AND THE INVENTION OF AMERICA His arrival in Philadelphia is one of the most famous scenes in autobiographical literature: bedraggled 17-year-old fugitive, cheery yet with the pretense of humility, straggling off a boat and buying three swollen rolls as he wanders along Market Street. But wait a minute. There's something else. Clean the layer back, and we can see him as a 65-year-old crooked observer sitting in an English country house, writing this scene, pretending to be part of a letter to his son, an illegitimate son who became royal governor with aristocratic pre-claimings and should be reminded of his humble roots. A careful look at the manuscript exfoliates another layer. Inserted in the proposal for the progress of his pilgrim on Market Street is a phrase written in the margins in which he notes that he passed the house of his future wife, Deborah Reed, and that she, standing at the door, saw me and thought that I had done, as I am, of course, the most clumsy funny look. So here we have, in a brief paragraph, a multi-layered character known so fondly to its author as Benjamin Franklin: as a young man, then seen through the eyes of his older self, and then through flashbacks later told by his wife. All this is topped by the old man's deft little statement, as I certainly did, in which his self-deprecation barely hides the pride he felt about his remarkable rise in the world.1 Benjamin Franklin is a founding father who winks at us. George Washington's colleagues found it hard to imagine stern general on his shoulder, and we'll find him even more so today. Jefferson and Adams are just as intimidating. But Ben Franklin, this ambitious urban entrepreneur, seems to be made of flesh, not marble, addressable by nickname, and he addresses us from the scene of the story with eyes that shimmered because of these new-fashioned glasses. He speaks to us, through his letters and hoaxes and autobiographies, not with orotund rhetoric, but with a chatty and clever irony that is very modern, sometimes unnerving so. We see its reflection in our time. During his 84-year life, he was America's best scientist, inventor, diplomat, writer and business strategist, and one of the most practical, though not the deepest, political thinkers. He proved by flying the kite that lightning was electricity, and he invented the rod to tame it. He developed bifocal glasses and clean ovens, Gulf Stream graphics and theories about the contagious nature of the common cold. He has launched various civil improvement schemes, such as a credit library, college, volunteer fire corps, insurance association and related grant fundraisers. He helped invent America's unique style of homespun humor and philosophical pragmatism. In foreign policy, he has created an approach that weaves idealism with the realism of the balance of power. And in politics, he proposed fundamental plans to unify the colonies and create a federal model of national government. But the most interesting thing that Franklin invented, and constantly reinvented, was himself. America's first great publicist, he was, in his life and in his writings, consciously trying to create a new American archetype. In the process, he carefully developed his own persona, portrayed him in public, and polished it for posterity. It was partly an image issue. As a young printer in Philadelphia, he ox rolls paper through the streets to give the look of hard work. As an old diplomat in France, he wore a fur hat to portray the role of a sage zakhord. In between, he created an image for himself as a simple but aspiring merchant, diligently honing virtues - diligence, thrift, honesty - a good shopkeeper and reverent member of his community. But the image he created was based on reality. Born and raised a member of the leather apron class, Franklin was, at least for most of his life, more comfortable with artisans and thinkers than with the established elite, and he was allergic to the pomp and perks of hereditary aristocracy. Throughout his life, he treated himself like B. Franklin, a printer. From these views emerged what may be Franklin's most important vision: an American national identity based on the virtues and values of his middle class. Instinctively more comfortable with democracy than was its fellow founders, and snobbery that later critics would feel towards his own shopkeeping values, he believed in the wisdom of the common man and felt that the new nation would draw its strength from what he called the average people. Through his self-improvement advice for cultivating personal virtues and his civic improvement schemes to improve the common good, he helped create and celebrate a new ruling class of ordinary citizens. The complex interaction between the various aspects of Franklin's character - his ingenuity and unde reflected wisdom, his Protestant ethic, detached from dogma, the principles he held firmly, and those he was willing to compromise - means that every new look at him reflects and refracts the changing values of the nation. He was reviled in romantic periods and lionized in entrepreneurial ones. Each epoch evaluates it anew, and at the same time reveals some assessments of himself. Franklin has a special resonance in The FIRST Century America. A successful publisher and consummate networker with inventive curiosity, he would feel at home in the information revolution, and his unabashed desire to be part of an up-mobile meritocracy made him, according to social critic David Brooks, our founder of Yuppie. We can easily imagine a beer with him after work, showing him how to use the latest digital devices, sharing a business plan for a new venture, and discussing recent political scandals or political ideas. He laughed at the last joke about the priest and the rabbi, or at the farmer's daughter. We would admire both his seriousness and his self-awareness of irony. And we would like to relate to the way he tried to balance, sometimes restlessly, the desire for reputation, wealth, earthly virtues and spiritual values.2 Some who see Franklin's reflection in the modern world are worried about the superficiality of the soul and the spiritual complacency that seems to permeate the culture of materialism. It is said that it teaches us how to live a practical and monetary life, but not a sublime existence. Others see the same reflection and admire the core values of the middle class and the democratic sentiments that now seem to be under attack by the elite, radicals, reactionaries and other bourgeoisie bashers. They see Franklin as a model of personal character and civic virtue that are all too often absent in modern America. Much of the admiration is justified, and so too is some of the remorse. But the lessons of Franklin's life are more difficult than those usually done by either his fans or his enemies. Both sides too often confuse him with the aspiring pilgrim he portrayed in his autobiography. They take his ingenious moral maxims beyond the fundamental religions that his actions. His morality was built on a sincere belief in a virtuous life, serving the country he loved, and hoping to achieve salvation through good deeds. Case. led him to make a connection between private virtue and civic virtue, and to suspect, based on the scant evidence he could have received about God's will, that these earthly virtues were related to heaven. As he put it in the motto of the library he founded, it is divine to pour out the benefits for the common good. Compared to contemporaries such as Jonathan Edwards, who believed that people are sinners in the hands of an angry God and that salvation can come through grace alone, this worldview may seem somewhat smug. In some ways it was, but it was also authentic. Whatever point of view you occupy, it is useful to interact with Franklin again, for in doing so we are struggling with a fundamental question: how to live a life that is useful, virtuous, worthy, moral and spiritually meaningful? For that matter, which of these attributes is the most important? These questions are as important for the self-confident age as they are for the revolutionary. CHAPTER TWO PILGRIM'S PROGRESS Boston, 1706-1723 FRANKLINS ECTON In the late Middle Ages, a new class appeared in the villages of rural England: men who possessed property and wealth but were not members of the titled aristocracy. Proud but without much pretensions, pushy their rights as members of the independent middle class, these libertarians were known as franklins, from the average English word frankeleyyn meaning freeman.1 When surnames have purchased currency, families from the upper classes tend to take over the names of their domains, such as Lancaster or Salisbury. Their tenants sometimes resorted to the calls of their small lawn, such as Hill or Meadows. Artisans tend to take their name from their labor, whether it's Smith or Taylor or Weaver. And for some families, the descriptor that seemed most appropriate was Franklin. The earliest documented use of this name by one of Benjamin Franklin's ancestors, at least, which can be found today, was his great-grandfather Thomas Franklin or Franklin, born around 1540 in the Northamptonshire village of Acton. His independent spirit became part of the family knowledge. This obscure family of ours was at the beginning of the Reformation, Franklin later wrote, and was sometimes in danger of trouble because of their zeal against popery. When the queen Mary I participated in her bloody crusade to restore the Roman Catholic Church, Thomas Franklin kept the forbidden English Bible tied to the bottom of the chair. The stool could have been turned on its knees so that the Bible could be read aloud, but then instantly hidden whenever the apparial rode.2 Thomas Franklin's strong but pragmatic independence, along with his clever ingenuity, seems to have been passed down through four generations. The family produced dissenters and nonconformists who were to challenge the authorities, though not before becoming fanatics. They were smart, and inventive blacksmiths with a love of learning. An avid readers and writers, they had deep convictions but knew how to wear them lightly. Sociable by nature, the Franklins tended to become trusted advisers to their neighbors, and they prided themselves on being part of the middle class of independent shopkeepers and merchants and free owners. It may just be the vanity of a biographer to think that a person's character can be illuminated by rummaging among his family roots and pointing to repetitive traits that culminate neatly in the personality at hand. Still, Franklin's family heritage seems like a fruitful place to start research. For some people the most important forming element is the place. To appreciate Harry Truman, for example, you have to understand the boundary of nineteenth-century Missouri; Besides, you have to delve into the Hill Country of Texas to understand Lyndon Johnson.3 But Benjamin Franklin wasn't so rooted. His legacy was that people without a place - the younger sons of middle-class artisans, most of whom have made their careers in cities different from their fathers. Thus, it is best understood as a product of the line, not the land. What's more, Franklin thought so, too. I have ever had the pleasure of getting any little anecdotes of my ancestors, reads the introductory sentence in his autobiography. It was a pleasure he would engage when he went to Acton as a middle-aged man to interview distant relatives, research church records, and copy inscriptions from family tombstones. Dissenting streak that ran into his family, he found involved more than just matters of religion. Thomas Franklin's father

