

Diplomacy of the American Revolution

1776-1783

Benjamin Franklin: First American Diplomat

Benjamin Franklin, the most distinguished scientific and literary American of his age, was the first American diplomat. He served from 1776 to 1778 on a three-man commission to France charged with the critical task of gaining French support for American independence. French aristocrats and intellectuals embraced Franklin as the personification of the New World Enlightenment. His likeness appeared on medallions, rings, watches, and snuffboxes, while fashionable ladies adopted the coiffure à la Franklin in imitation of the fur cap he wore instead of a wig. His popularity and diplomatic skill—along with the first American battlefield success at Saratoga—convinced France to recognize American independence and conclude an alliance with the thirteen states in 1778. Franklin presented his credentials to the French court in 1779, becoming the first American Minister (the 18th American century equivalent of ambassador) to be received by a foreign government. Franklin's home in Passy, just outside Paris, became the center of American diplomacy in Europe. When Thomas Jefferson succeeded Franklin in 1785, the French Foreign Minister, Vergennes asked: "It is you who replace Dr. Franklin?" Jefferson replied, "No one can replace him, Sir; I am only his successor."

John Jay in Madrid

Elected President of the Continental Congress at age 32, John Jay was a bright and capable lawyer from a well-to-do New York merchant family. On September 27, 1779, Jay was appointed Minister to the Spanish Court and entrusted with the task of obtaining support for the American cause and recognition of American independence. There were reasons to hope that Jay might succeed. The monarchies of Spain and France were linked together by the Bourbon Family Compact. Spain had long-standing colonial grievances against Great Britain, especially British control of the strategic Mediterranean fortress of Gibraltar. On April 12, 1779, Spain secretly agreed to join France in waging war on the British, but unlike the French, the Spanish declaration of war on June 21, 1779, did not include recognition of American independence or agreement to fight Britain until America was independent. Still Jay seemed the ideal candidate to win over the court at Madrid to the American cause. Tall, slender, well spoken, and with a streak of stubborn determination, Jay spent over 2 frustrating years in Madrid. He was effectively cut off from the court, existing in good part upon occasional, grudging donations from the principal Spanish minister, the Conde de Floridablanca. Although no friend to Britain, Floridablanca worried about American claims to lands west of the Appalachians and navigation rights on the Mississippi River and feared that the flames of the American revolution might spread to Spanish colonies in the Americas. Although Jay failed with Spain, he became a Peace Commissioner in Paris. He helped to negotiate the peace with Great Britain ending the War for Independence. After the war, Jay declined the post of Minister to Great Britain, but accepted the draft of the Continental Congress to become its Secretary of Foreign Affairs responsible for the foreign relations of the new American nation.