



FRANKLIN'S CARTOON

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Two hundred and seventy years ago — May 9, 1754 — Benjamin Franklin published this cartoon in his newspaper, the Pennsylvania Gazette. It’s generally regarded as the first American newspaper cartoon and the first visual representation of a union of American colonies.

While this image and others based on it were used during the American Revolution, that’s not why Franklin created it. This cartoon was aimed at urging the colonies to pull together to fight with the British in what came to be called the French and Indian War.

FRANKLIN'S EDITORIAL CARTOONS

The French and Indian War began in May 1754 between British and French colonies in America and each side’s Native American allies.

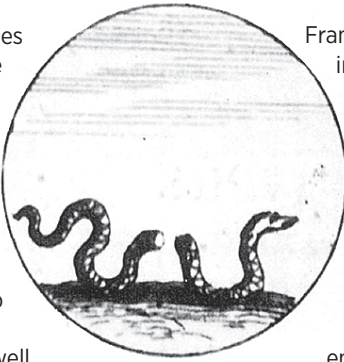
British colonists wanted to expand their territory westward — not only to profit from hunting, trapping and farming but also from land speculation. When war broke out, British colonists were torn on whether or not a frontier war was worth the expense and sacrifice.

Franklin’s point with the cartoon was that Britain’s colonies needed to pull together and face this potential threat to the west. Failure could mean their eventual extinction.

The first thing one might notice about the cartoon is that only eight colonies are represented. Franklin

showed the four colonies of New England as one — perhaps out of custom or perhaps out of laziness. Delaware, at the time, was considered part of Pennsylvania. And Georgia had become a royal colony only two years before, in 1752. Franklin omitted it as well.

This wasn’t the first time Franklin used a snake to represent the British colonies. He had published a savage satire in 1751, “Rattlesnakes for Felons,” in which he cited a long list of English criminals who had been sent to America as punishment. He proposed the colonists send rattlesnakes to England in exchange.



Franklin had also likely drawn inspiration from an engraving he had seen in an “emblem book” — a collection of drawings accompanied by text that explained the symbolism behind the drawings — published in France in 1696.

One of the emblems was a snake. The text below said: “Un serpent coupe en deux. Se rejoindre ou mourir.” “A serpent cut in two. Either join or die.”

While Franklin’s “Join, or die” cartoon would go viral in a big way — reprinted in other newspapers, redrawn into

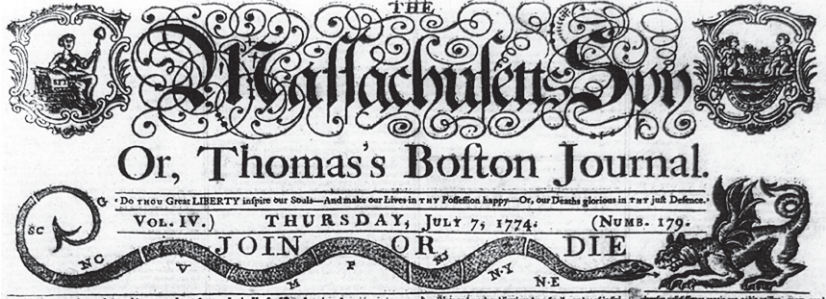
handbills distributed on street corners and so on — Franklin would go on to create other memorable editorial cartoons. One example is this one from 1765, showing Britain — represented by Lady Britannia — suffering from having needlessly cut off her limbs — the American colonies — by offending them with the Stamp Act.



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

TWO OTHER USES OF FRANKLIN'S SNAKE ANALOGY

Paul Revere himself redrew Franklin’s cartoon in 1774 and used it across the top of the front page of the Massachusetts Spy newspaper. Notice that Revere’s version — 20 years after Franklin’s — included Georgia.



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And while this snake isn’t segmented and the slogan is different, Continental Army Gen. Christopher Gadson began using a snake icon on his personal flag in December 1775.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: SCHOLAR, SCIENTIST, DIPLOMAT ... AND JOURNALIST

Benjamin Franklin was born the youngest of 17 children to a Boston soap and candlemaker in 1706.

His father had only so much money to spend on Franklin’s education. “I do not remember when I could not read,” he would write in his posthumously published autobiography. He learned at an early age he would have to educate himself on the topics that interested him.

That turned out to be a *lot* of topics. He started out at age 12 as a printer’s apprentice but began attracting notice with satirical essays he wrote under the pen name of a middle-aged widow.

Franklin left his apprenticeship early — which was illegal at the time — moved to Philadelphia and by early adulthood had founded a print shop, won the contract to print paper currency for Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware and Maryland and had become one of the wealthiest men in the colonies.

In his spare time, he studied science — nearly any elementary schooler today can repeat the story of Franklin’s experiment to determine whether or not lightning is a form of electricity.

In 1729, Franklin and a business partner founded the Pennsylvania Gazette. Three years later, he’d begin publishing a yearly almanac under the pen name Richard Saunders. He’d publish “Poor Richard’s Almanack” for 26



WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
Franklin in 1767, during his time in London.

consecutive years.

Franklin became involved in Philadelphia politics, serving as a city councilman, a justice of the peace and as a member of the Pennsylvania assembly. He was appointed postmaster in 1737, responsible for all the colonies north and east, including Newfoundland. He helped write the Declaration of Independence, served as an envoy to Great Britain and then to France.

Would a man with so many interests and abilities spend time doing the elaborate woodcutting work required to create an editorial cartoon in 1754? Most likely yes, wrote J.A. Leo Lemay of the University of Delaware in a 1987 essay for The Pennsylvania Magazine of History & Biography.

“Many printers, including Franklin, made their own woodcuts and carefully designed the visual appearance of their broadsides, newspapers, pamphlets and books,” Lemay wrote.

“He could draw, make woodcuts and engrave and he emphasized the importance of some art training in his writing on education,” Lemay wrote. “But he did not think of himself as an artist. Nevertheless, he is among the most visually conscious writers of eighteenth-century America: he frequently used emblems, devices and visual pictures and he deliberately attempted to create visual effects through his writing.”

Sources: “Rediscovering the Founding Fathers: The Illustrated History of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness” by Morin Bishop, “Editorial and Political Cartooning” by Syd Hoff, J.A. Leo Lemay in the Pennsylvania Magazine of History & Biography, National Archives’ “Founders Online,” Library of Congress, National Constitution Center, PBS’ “Ken Burns in the Classroom,” Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Herb Block Foundation, DailyCartoonist.com, Rochester Institute of Technology, University of Houston’s Digital History, History.com