

EMBASSY ROW
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REINVENTING HIMSELF

Benjamin Franklin peered pensively from his 18th-century portrait in the elegant State Department dining room named for the father of American diplomacy, as diplomats and scholars recounted his achievements, marveled at his wit and tittered at tales of the flirtatious envoy to the courts of George III in London and Louis XVI in Paris.

"He would have loved this night. He would love to celebrate himself," said Walter Isaacson, who wrote a best-selling biography of Franklin in 2003, at a banquet Wednesday night to benefit the Benjamin Franklin House Foundation in London. Mr. Isaacson, president of the Aspen Institute, noted that among Franklin's inventions, the most enduring was his own legacy.

"The best thing he invented was himself," Mr. Isaacson said, noting that Franklin came from middle-class stock in Colonial America, and presented himself as a gentleman in London and then as a backwoods philosopher in a bearskin cap in Paris.

Franklin was a Colonial representative in London from 1757 until 1775, as tensions between Britain and her colony were building toward full-scale war. A year later, he helped draft the Declaration of Independence and sailed to Paris as America's first ambassador.

By that time, the French were enthralled by the image of the American as a "noble savage," so Franklin adopted the role. He stopped wearing wigs and donned the bearskin cap. The fashionable ladies of Paris loved the roughshod envoy, who already was 70, but King Louis was not impressed.

"Even then the French were a bit of a handful," Mr. Isaacson said. "But without French help, we would not have won the war. "By 1778, Franklin had persuaded the French government to support the American War of Independence with troops and financial aid. In 1787, at age 81, Franklin served as a representative to the Constitutional Convention, where he used his considerable influence to urge a compromise between large and small states over representation in the new Congress.

Mr. Isaacson recounted Franklin meeting a woman after the Constitution was signed. She asked what kind of government it created.

" 'A republic,' he replied, 'if you can keep it,' " Mr. Isaacson said.

Kurt Volker, principal deputy assistant secretary of state, referred to Franklin's ability to play to his audience in order to get what he needed for his country. "He went off to France, brokered the deal, while playing the role of the rustic, this educated Renaissance man. That's diplomacy," he said.

Marcia Balisciano, director of the Benjamin Franklin House, noted that the Georgian building at 36 Craven St. in the heart of London is thought to be the only house occupied by Franklin that still stands. Her foundation spent years restoring what she called "the first de facto American embassy." It attracted 10,000 visitors after opening last year on Jan. 13, just days before the 300th anniversary of Franklin's birth. With Catherine Manning, wife of British Ambassador David Manning, in the audience, Mrs. Balisciano added that Franklin "planted the seeds of a very special relationship [between the United States and Britain] that still exists today."

BEN FRANKLIN AWARD

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice also honored the memory of the "Father of the American Foreign Service" when she announced the creation of the Benjamin Franklin Award for Public Diplomacy.

Addressing a summit of private public relations professionals who promote U.S. foreign policy, Miss Rice said the award will honor private businesses and foundations, nongovernmental organizations and private citizens for their contributions to public diplomacy.

Also speaking in the Benjamin Franklin dining room earlier Wednesday, she said, "Like America, itself, Franklin has a seemingly limitless desire to help improve the world around him, and he did it with a sense of humor and a lot of grace. I know this because I read Walter Isaacson's book."