INTRODUCTION: Albany Plan

In 1754, as Britain and France struggled for control over North America, Benjamin Franklin proposed the Albany Plan of Union to unite the British North American colonies. His Plan called for the creation of a legislative body that would have the power to control commerce and organize defense in the face of attacks by the French or their Native American allies.

The Albany Plan was rejected by both the colonists and the British Crown. The Crown worried that the Plan would create a powerful colonial bloc that might prove difficult to control, while the colonists themselves did not yet recognize the value of intercolonial unity. Nevertheless, Franklin’s proposal to unite the colonies under a loose confederation contained many of the seeds of a unified national government that the founding fathers would adopt more than thirty years later at the Constitutional Convention.

Source:
The Albany Plan of Union, July 10, 1754.
Available at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/albany.asp
AND Benjamin Franklin.
“Reasons and Motives for the Albany Plan of Union, July 1754. “
Available at http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch7s2.html.

INTRODUCTION: Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence was adopted by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776. It proclaimed to the world that colonial America sought independence from Great Britain. It declared that independence rested on the clearest of principles: that men are created free and equal, and that they cannot legitimately be governed by those to whom they have not given their consent. Thomas Jefferson was the primary author of the document, aided by a committee including Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston.

The Declaration of Independence was written, in part, to demonstrate American resolve and solidarity in its formal split from Great Britain. This was important because the colonies needed to persuade potential allies—especially France—to aid the American cause.
INTRODUCTION: An Edict by the King of Prussia

In 1773, as tensions between Britain and America increased, a declaration purportedly by King Frederick II of Prussia was published in The Public Advertiser, a London newspaper. It asserted that because England was originally settled by Germans and was recently protected by Germany in the war against France, the British should pay exorbitant taxes to Prussia. If any precedent was needed, the British should look no further than their own treatment of colonial America. Franklin, the true author, delighted in the public’s dismay at his parody, boasting to his son William,

“I am not suspected as the author…and have heard the latter ['Edict'] spoken of in the highest terms as the keenest and severest piece that has appeared here a long time.”

[Letter from Benjamin Franklin to William Franklin, October 6, 1773]

Sources:
Declaration of Independence. Available at http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html
AND An Edict of the King of Prussia, September 22, 1773. Available at www.historycarper.com/resources/twobf3/pa-1773.htm
INTRODUCTION: The U.S. Constitution

Franklin returned to America in 1785 and within two years was once again at the center of the effort to define and shape the new nation. In 1787 he was the oldest member of the Constitutional Convention, suffering from poor health and often excruciating pain. Nonetheless, Franklin’s experience as a seasoned diplomat and negotiator, combined with his keen observation of human nature, made him an ideal delegate to the Convention. His most important contributions were his spirit of pragmatic compromise and strong desire for unity. He drew on both to play a significant role in brokering the “Great Compromise”: a legislature of two houses, one elected in proportion to population and one in which each state would have equal representation.

“I confess, that I do not entirely approve of this Constitution at present; but Sir, I am not sure I shall never approve it …Thus I consent, Sir, to this Constitution, because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best.”
—Benjamin Franklin, Speech in the Convention at the Conclusion of its Deliberations, September 17, 1787

Source:
U.S. Constitution. Available at www.constitutioncenter.org/explore