Lesson Plan – (US History, Colonial/Revolutionary Era)

Title: “Ben Franklin and the Origins of American Diplomacy”

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I. Introduction

The European practice of diplomacy since the days of the Renaissance was guided by expectations of subterfuge and intrigue. A diplomat or ambassador was tolerated as a necessary evil, a practitioner of the art of espionage under the guise of cultured erudition. He was also expected to be “rich, well born and handsome…a ‘well sounding name,’ and some pretentions to ancient lineage… and fluent in a language other than English.”

Philadelphian Ben Franklin was dispatched on three diplomatic missions during his life, two to London and one to Paris.

This lesson will examine the diplomacy of Ambassador Franklin – the methods he employed and the conditions in which he operated – in carrying out his assignments in London and in Paris.

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II. Guiding Question: To what extent did Franklin’s failures in London and his success in Paris arise from 1) his diplomatic methods, and/or 2) the conditions existing at the time of his missions?

III. Learning Objectives:

a. Students will be able to identify the colonists’ strategic objectives in London and Paris; and

b. Students will be able to assess the outcome of Ambassador Franklin’s efforts to secure the colonists’ objectives in London and Paris; and

c. Students will be able to identify Ambassador Franklin’s methods and the prevailing conditions (on the continent and in the colonies) affecting the outcome of his efforts in London and Paris; and

d. Students will be able to assess whether Ambassador Franklin’s methods or the prevailing conditions in London and Paris were the determining factor in the outcomes.

IV. Background for the Teacher

“Diplomacy played a key role in America’s struggle for independence from England.” Diplomacy is the chief instrument of foreign policy and negotiation is the key tactic of diplomacy. As commonly defined, diplomacy is “the art and practice of conducting negotiations between nations, and as skill in handling affairs without causing hostility.”

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Philadelphian Benjamin Franklin undertook three diplomatic missions – two to London and one to Paris. They were all consequential, but not all were successful. They included:

- A mission to London on behalf of the Pennsylvania Assembly that culminated in a January 15, 1758, meeting with Thomas Penn, son of Pennsylvania’s founder, the late William Penn. His mission was to persuade Penn to comply with laws passed by the Assembly, including the right to impose taxes on Penn’s land holdings in Pennsylvania.

- A mission to London that culminated in his appearance before Parliament on February 13, 1766. His mission was to persuade Parliament to revoke the Stamp Act and other punitive laws enacted against the colonies.

- A mission to Paris that led to Franklin’s hastily arranged meeting on March 20, 1778 with King Louis XVI of France. Franklin’s mission was to secure an alliance between the “13 united provinces” and France in the colonists’ war of independence from Britain.

The primary preparatory reading for this lesson comes from the book, 10 Days Benjamin Franklin. It is designed to be supplemented by student research in library-endorsed internet data bases. This 10 Days books provides short chapter readings on each of the Franklin missions to London and Paris. Reading level is appropriate for high school readers.

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V. Suggested Activity

This activity is intended to be conducted in class within a two 80-minute blocks. A homework reading is assigned prior to the class and is to be completed by class time. A historical essay (argument based) is due at the start of the follow-up class when a peer edit of the typed essays will be performed in class.

This activity involves research, analysis and presentations by small groups of students working together to answer the Guiding Question/s.

Preparatory -- Prior to initiating this in-class activity, students are divided into groups of no more than three students each. All members of the group take part in all three aspects of the lesson (research, analysis and presentation). Each group is assigned one of the three Franklin missions noted in Part IV above, and is assigned a companion reading from the 10 Days book that describes how Franklin carried out his mission.

In-class -- For the first 30 minutes of class, each group queries the internet data bases on their assigned mission seeking to gather more information on two points of interest, specifically:

- What was the historical context, particularly the political and economic climate, in London or Paris at the time of Franklin’s mission?
- What actions did Franklin take to influence the outcome of that mission? Did any of these actions include any use of subterfuge or deception?
- What obstacles did Franklin have to overcome in each of his missions?
After allowing time for research, refocus the group for 20 minutes on analyzing the information they have gathered, examining particularly the methods and conditions that influenced the outcome of Franklin’s mission. Each group should be prepared to answer the following questions:

- Was Franklin successful in carrying out his mission?
- Did he achieve what he was sent to London/Paris to accomplish? Why or why not?
- Was the outcome of his mission pre-determined – meaning, was the outcome inevitable, regardless of Franklin’s efforts?
- To what extent did Franklin’s methods (strategy, tactics, etc.) influence the outcome?
- To what extent did the conditions in London/Paris (the attitudes of officials, economic or political culture, etc.) influence the outcome?
- What obstacles did Franklin have to overcome?

Allow 30 minutes for each group to present its hypothesis – in essence, its responses to the above list of questions. Students should take notes on a teacher-prepared graphic organizer that lists each of the above questions. The teacher and students may ask questions of the presenters, but the teacher should refrain from agreeing or disagreeing with the hypotheses.

Finally, ask each student to prepare an argument-based five-paragraph essay in response to the following prompt:

“The outcome of Benjamin Franklin’s diplomatic missions to London and Paris were largely determined by conditions
rather than Franklin’s methods.” To what extent do you agree with this statement?

VI. Assessments

1) Assign each group’s oral presentation a quick assessment (check, check minus or check plus) based on how well each group supports its hypothesis with evidence from the 10 Days book and/or internet research.

2) Assess each student’s historical essay on the strength of its argument, giving extra weight to those essays that
   a. Successfully challenge the assumptions implied in the question
   b. Make use of analytical tools (change over time, compare and contrast, cause and effect, etc.)
   c. Make effective use of appropriate factual knowledge of 18th century Britain, France and the American colonies.