

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN & THE ALBANY CONGRESS

1754 • “Join, or Die” • The Albany Plan of Union



“Join, or Die,” Pennsylvania Gazette, May 9, 1754. Library of Congress.

What Was the Albany Congress?

- Met in Albany, New York, June 19–July 11, 1754.
- Delegates came from seven British colonies: Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island.
- Benjamin Franklin attended as a Pennsylvania commissioner.
- **Two central concerns:** relations with the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy and common colonial defense as conflict with France intensified.

Franklin’s Big Idea

- Franklin believed the colonies were too divided to defend themselves effectively.
- His “Join, or Die” cartoon argued visually for cooperation.
- At Albany he advanced a general colonial government while the colonies remained within the British Empire.

IMPORTANT Franklin was proposing **UNION** in 1754 — not independence from Britain.

The Albany Plan of Union

- **President-General** — appointed and supported by the British Crown.
- **Grand Council** — representatives chosen by colonial assemblies.
- **Representation** — eventually tied to contributions to the common treasury, within minimum and maximum limits.
- **Meetings** — at least annually; the first proposed meeting place was Philadelphia.
- **Indian affairs** — shared diplomacy, treaties, trade, and certain land purchases.
- **Western settlements** — authority to establish and temporarily govern new settlements.
- **Defense** — raise soldiers, build forts, equip vessels, and protect trade.
- **Revenue** — levy general duties, imposts, or taxes for common purposes.

- **Laws** — required cooperation of the Grand Council and President-General, under imperial oversight.

Readable Version of the Manuscript

OPENING IDEA A general government would be formed for the colonies, administered by a President-General and Grand Council, while the colonies otherwise retained their existing governments.

- The Grand Council would be chosen through the colonial assemblies.
- The central government would handle matters affecting the colonies collectively.
- It would possess real governing powers, including defense and taxation.

Two Revealing Passages

WAR POWERS The Grand Council could “raise and Pay Soldiers & Build Forts” and equip vessels for defense and protection of trade.

TAXATION The plan authorized duties, imposts, or taxes judged “Most Equal & Just,” while seeking to avoid unnecessary burdens on industry.

What Happened?

- The Albany delegates approved the essentials after debate and revision.
- The plan went to colonial governments and British authorities but never took effect.
- Colonial assemblies resisted surrendering power to a central authority; imperial officials also objected.

THE PARADOX The colonies needed unity, but neither the colonies nor Britain accepted Franklin’s particular form of union.

Why It Matters

- The plan confronted a lasting problem: how to combine local self-government with enough central power to solve common problems.
- It was not a direct draft of the Constitution, but it belongs to the long development of American federal thinking.

- Franklin spans that development: Albany in 1754, independence in 1776, and the Constitutional Convention in 1787.

THE LONG ROAD TO UNION 1754

Albany Plan → 1774-76 Continental Congresses → 1781 Articles of Confederation → 1787 Constitution → 1789 federal government

Connection to Our First Civil War

- Brands emphasizes how difficult colonial unity actually was.
- Franklin’s 1754 proposal shows that the problem of bringing separate colonies together long predated independence.
- By the 1770s, the question shifted from cooperation inside the British Empire to whether Americans should remain in it.

BOOK CLUB TAKEAWAY “Join, or Die” and the Albany Plan make a powerful pair: one supplied the memorable symbol; the other supplied a concrete political design for cooperation.

Primary Sources

- **Library of Congress:** Benjamin Franklin, “Join, or Die,” Pennsylvania Gazette, May 9, 1754. No known restrictions on publication.
- **Library of Congress:** Benjamin Franklin, Plan of Proposed Union (Albany Plan), 1754, Hazard Papers in the Peter Force Collection.
- Library of Congress “Creating the United States” exhibition: manuscript views and readable transcriptions of selected sections.