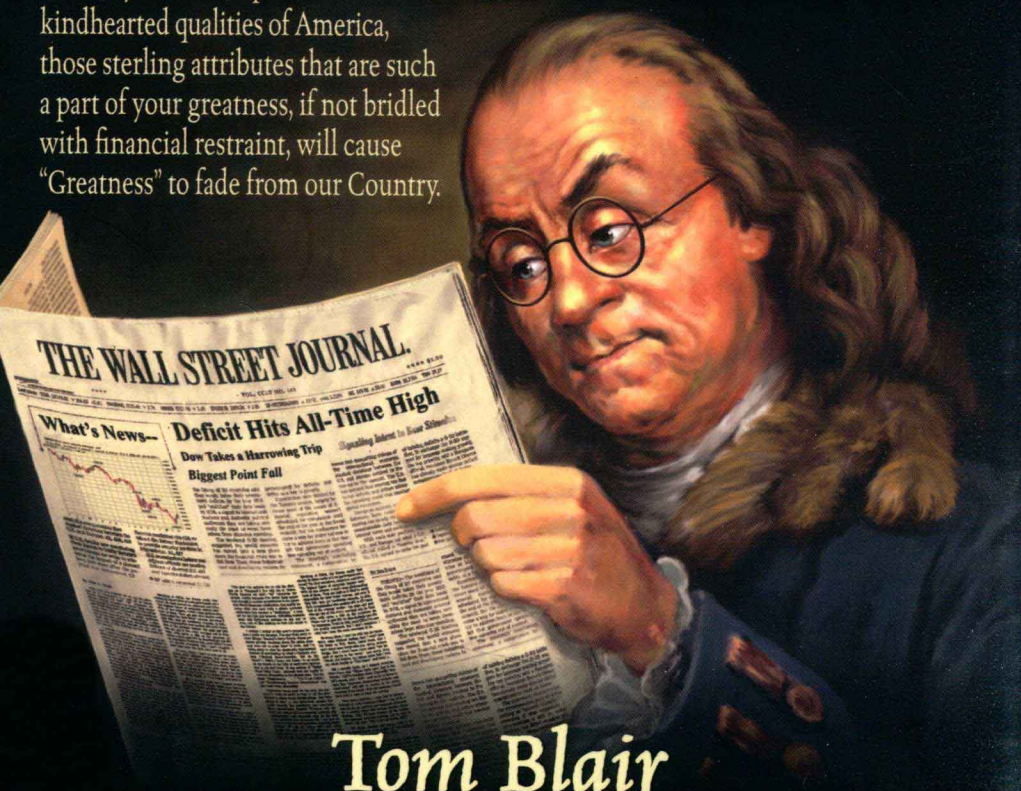


# POORER RICHARD'S AMERICA

— *What Would Ben Say?* —

For the year 2011, I proffer that those kindhearted qualities of America, those sterling attributes that are such a part of your greatness, if not bridled with financial restraint, will cause "Greatness" to fade from our Country.



Tom Blair

*Foreword by Tom Brokaw*

# POORER RICHARD'S AMERICA

## WHAT WOULD BEN SAY?

TOM BLAIR

*"It is the easiest thing in the world  
for a Man to deceive himself."*

—Poor Richard's; April 1746

*"So it be for a Nation."*

—Poorer Richard's America; September 2010



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# FOREWORD

BY TOM BROKAW

Who among us has not wondered what the Founding Fathers of this unique democratic republic and free-market economy would think of what their dream has become?

George Washington, the stern father of the country, who had the air of majesty but rejected the temptations of royalty. Mr. Jefferson, the poet of liberty and champion of governing from the bottom up and not the top down. Hamilton, the boy wonder financial genius who, through the force of his intellect and oratory, gave the fledgling nation a central nervous system for its economy. John Adams, the passionate advocate with the great legal mind and even greater patriot's heart.

And, of course, Benjamin Franklin, journalist, printer, politician, sage, scientist, diplomat, raconteur, iconoclast, ladies man and, most of all, the quintessential American then and even now.

Walter Isaacson, in his award-winning biography, *Benjamin Franklin, An American Life*, describes him as the founding father who winks at us. His combination of wit

and wisdom is best distilled, of course, in his *Poor Richard's Almanack*, which he began publishing in 1732 as a means of making money and promoting virtue.

It was an instant success, outselling even the Bible, and it lives on today as a model of topical and enduring humor, practical information such as the tidal charts, weather, eclipses, and lunar phases.

However, the genius of Franklin was his ability to see complex issues with great clarity and convey to mass audiences a simple road map to understanding. His many observations grew out of his own youthful effort to design a set of virtues by which he would lead his own life.

Among them:

Temperance: "Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation."

Frugality: "Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself."

Industry: "Lose no time; always be employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions."

There were thirteen virtues in all and they in turn led to a lifelong trail of Benjamin Franklin aphorisms that are so familiar and remain so relevant that they can help us navigate personal goals and national interests more than two centuries later.

As the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks has observed, "They are not particularly spiritual virtues but they are practical and they are democratic."

Who has not been told, "Early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise?" Franklin was not above refining the work of others or old-folk sayings and making them sharper and, in so doing, more useful.

"Little strokes fell great oaks."

"The cat in gloves catches no mice."

"He's a fool who makes his doctor his heir."

"Love your enemies for they will tell you your faults."

In this ambitious book by Tom Blair, *Poorer Richard's America*, we're invited to ponder what Benjamin Franklin might think of our common virtues and national direction now, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, when many of the hubristic assumptions of twentieth-century America are under siege.

Mr. Blair skillfully weaves his own thoughts on financial excesses, national will, journalism, entertainment, generational legacies, and the popular culture with the real and imagined reflections of his hero, Benjamin Franklin.

It is a provocative undertaking and, in the spirit of Franklin's mischievous manner, it is designed to at once make us think about the many ways in which we lost our way and how a daily inventory of time-tested virtues can help show us the way once again to a firm foundation built on higher ground.

"No gains without pains."

"When the well's dry we know the worth of water."

"There was never a good knife made of bad steel."

Franklin was not always a popular figure. His tart tongue, agnosticism, and flair for self-serving publicity earned him a full quota of critics and even enemies. When he died, John Adams, who long had been a critic and yet a friend of Franklin, wrote that he "had a great genius, original, sagacious, and inventive . . . He had talents for irony, allegory, and fable that he could adapt with great skill to the promotion of moral and political truth."

Tom Blair rightly asks, "Where is our Benjamin Franklin and why aren't we listening to the original?"

—TOM BROKAW  
JULY 2010

# INTRODUCTION



KIND READER,

**F**or two centuries, plus two decades, I have been observing you with utmost fascination and, at times, unfettered amazement . . . a stroll on the moon, who would have dreamt. While I am foremost proud of you, and think proudly of myself as one of you, of late I have become heavy with worry. For many Americans, the fire in the belly no longer seems to burn. More and more of you cling tight to the Great Federal Breast while beseeching your government to kiss your hurts and chase the pain



away. But alas, the pain is increasing as your government casts future generations adrift in a sea of debt. Both you, dear citizens, and your nation's finances are capsized and sinking by the stern. Your credit cards . . . I thought lightning was frightful . . . mortgages and the National Debt are screaming in agony. Meanwhile insecure elected officials spew forth vile declarations crafted to demonize their opposition in hopes of positioning themselves for reelection . . . thus ensuring for themselves a player's role and costume on the Nation's Stage of Tragedy.

*"Here comes the orator, with his flood of words, and his drop of reason."*

*Poor Richard's; October 1735*

Not wishing to pummel, but rather to propel you, let me acknowledge what a truly admirable nation of citizens populate America. You are generous. Generous with your money and your time. Always ready to help another country's citizens. When attacked, you strive to win; then, once victorious, you rebuild your defeated opponent. The contentment of another nation is not your discontentment. For most Americans a healthy and loving family is still the greatest treasure. And, as always, Americans are prepared to toil diligently for a fair day's pay.

Now for the grim news. My dear America may well have touched its majestic zenith, thus being poised to begin its slide from grace. With a quick shrug, many of you dismiss my pleading; why not, when in booming voices politicians boast, "America is the greatest nation the world has ever

seen"? Certainly to the ear their trumpeting is quite reassuring; as reassuring as were British statesmen of my generation smugly claiming that "Britannia rules the waves" . . . Alas, two hundred years later Britannia, with its cracked spars, tattered sails, and rotting hull, sits idle, moored to the dock of past greatness.

*"The golden age is never the present age."*

*Poor Richard's; December 1750*

A glance back, if we may. During the first two centuries of America's existence most parents struggled mightily to provide their children a better life than theirs had been. Generation after generation of parents toiled long days for the betterment of their offspring, and thus created a most wondrous by-product: a nation of agricultural abundance and industrial might. Your forefathers and foremothers didn't require a State or Federal Stimulus Package to nurture national growth; by working and sacrificing for Junior and little Missy they forged the most robust economic engine the world has seen.

And there was another raw reality that shaped the early American profile. Most families ate only what they killed or grew. For my countrymen an empty belly was an uncompromising motivator for clearing fields and planting crops, pausing only to track deer or build a fish dam. Hunger was not an abstract notion for most citizens of early America, it was a lifelong partner. The absolute need to toil for next week's bread, next season's crop, next year's slaughtering, created not so much an American work ethic as a survival ethic.

So, then, permit me to ask an indelicate question: If for the past decades modern Americans haven't been tracking deer to feed the family, or saving 25 percent of hard-earned wages to make their children's future brighter than was theirs, what have they been doing? Please, by your leave, a drumroll and bow to the King. I hesitantly have concluded that conspicuous consumption has become not only a perverse addiction, but a god to many Americans; the twin cornerstones to American Consumerism being materialism and instant gratification.

*"Spare and have is better than spend and crave."*

*Poor Richard's; August 1758*

A spattering of materialism can serve well as the grease to the wagon . . . sorry, truck wheels of progress. Materialism being the desire for something not necessary for the enjoyment of everyday life, but providing an inner satisfaction of ego or pride. As a carrot on the end of a long stick dangling before a mule, the pursuit of a material object can motivate an individual to wondrous levels of creativity and productivity. Thus it is the path taken to obtain a material object that causes Satan to either frown or smile. Is the coveted object attained by studious application of hard work and focused thought, or does one liquidate a retirement fund to create a transient perception of wealth . . . or worse, dear reader, borrow against future hard work with a sliver of plastic?

While your propensity to gleefully consume by shoveling on personal debt is most frightening, there is another

attribute of today's generation of Americans that vexes me. It is your attitude, an attitude that encourages many to boast to the world that Americans, as a class, are the best.

*"As pride increases, fortunes decline."*

*Poor Richard's; August 1744*

Millions of those first citizens of America, with the cruel exception of those chained in the dark squalor of slave ships, endured hard journeys from England, Ireland, Germany, Italy, China, and other far-off lands to find the better life; or more accurately stated: to work for the better life. America was the land of opportunity, that opportunity being that if citizens toiled until their bones ached they might be able to pull more from the land than they could have, or were allowed to, in their motherland.

It is quite true then, dear citizens; quite true that most of you were born American. Not to be cruel, but you merely won the world lottery of citizenship. Perchance someone buys the winning lottery ticket, he is not therefore an exceptional individual; rather, just a lucky one. Many of today's American citizens may not be exceptional, just lucky. As you would say, "Right place, right time."

Do some of you kind citizens still have fire? Yes, but not the burning-hot fire of those travelers on the *Mayflower*, or of those pioneers walking in the dust next to their covered wagon so as not to tire the oxen. Today's America shelters its citizens from those rigors and cruelties its early generations suffered . . . no longer does one fear starvation, typhoid fever, a whipping by the master, or twelve-hour-

a-day, six-day-a-week, mind-numbing, backbreaking work in a textile mill or a blazing-hot foundry. Sharp-fanged fears of yesteryear have been displaced by a basket of less dire worries; many being self-inflicted materialistic worries . . . "Payments on my camper are killing me."

*"He who multiplies his possessions multiplies his cares."*

*Poor Richard's; September 1744*

There is yet another matter; another apprehension, another most grave worry of mine. It is the United States Congress. A Congress that too often delivers legislation crafted by an eye for what is best for the next election, not what is best for the next generation of Americans. And often what is best for the next election is the financial support of robust corporations and their relentless lobbyists.

Corporations have become the shadow fourth branch of your government. And by being such, they distort and corrupt the balance of interests and representations so carefully, so hopefully, conceived and memorialized in America's Constitution by our Nation's Founding Fathers. Recall, dear reader, that we were a nation of plowmen, hunters, craftsmen, and fishermen in 1776; no Founding Father could have envisioned that in two hundred years' time the voice of a single omnipotent corporation could mask, and thus overrule, the voices of thousands of America's citizens . . . if only we had written "All men and corporations are created equal."

So, fellow citizens, this is the problem . . . no, these are the problems. Many of you no longer possess a burning-hot

fire in your belly. It is not necessary. You are not hungry, and you enjoy a standard of living that most other residents of the planet covet. Many of you bask in the pride of being American without making sacrifices to maintain your Country as the greatest. Your national leaders fail to strike the alarm; rather, they stand at a podium perched on a mountain of National Debt, repeating to you what they believe you want to hear while spending whatever is necessary for your support. And in the halls of Congress, often deep and reverberating corporate voices drown out the whimpered pleas of individual Americans. Meanwhile there are a few billion folks, yes billions, in foreign lands who have fire in their bellies and are willing to struggle for a better life for themselves and their children . . . and many don't own houses or cars. Because their standard of living is dramatically below yours, they can crawl up the economic curve and become much happier while still underselling America in the international bazaar.

Only a mighty effort by its citizens will stay America's slow drift from "Greatest." Otherwise, America may slip to number two and then, perhaps, slide further from there. Erosion of economic influence and national pride won't force the closing of shopping malls or baseball stadiums; a decline will, however, require today's Americans to do what they do not do best: be somewhat humble.

While always generous to other nations, America has at times exercised a certain arrogance on the world stage. As your economic fortunes decline, no flood of sympathy will wash ashore from other lands. Foreigners will little remember, or care, that part of your large National Debt, which America wears as lead boots in the economic footrace with other nations, was incurred by America defending the

Free World during the Cold War. Few will tally the billions and billions of foreign aid exported during the past decades. Rather, while sipping a fine Merlot, smug foreigners will condescendingly whisper, "America became lazy," "They were arrogant," "Their leaders had no fiscal discipline."

*"A rich man has many friends, some true; a poor man has few friends, all true."*

*Poorer Richard's America; September 2010*

So, kind sirs and ladies, while abhorrently presumptuous of me, I have taken it upon myself to sound the alarm. I do this because your contemporary elected officials have little spine for the truth, and because I am a "Real American" . . . whatever this title may encompass, as uttered by a group of your self-anointed flag bearers who proudly boast they know those of you who are not "Real Americans."

*"Clean your finger before you point at spots."*

*Poor Richard's; June 1750*

So with your leave I will, by the laying of words on paper, attempt to shake you. Shake firmly to awaken you as to America's wayward course, shake you to consider what is not right, and shake you to ponder what might be, what could be . . . hoping that you will assume across your broad shoulders the mantle of responsibility for conveying to the next generations of Americans a Country no less great than the America that was bestowed upon you.

My chosen missive to convey my concerns and hopeful challenges is that with which I am most comfortable, *Poor Richard's Almanack*; for a span of twenty-five years this almanack was both written by me . . . under the pseudonym of Richard Saunders . . . and printed by me. Those initial almanacks served up by Poor Richard, the first ink pressed to paper in 1732, were written by this humble author not, as I said then, for the "publick good." Rather, *Poor Richard's Almanack* was born to this world to render my purse heavy and my mind at ease. This done to great happiness as year after year my Countrymen purchased, with dear pennies lifted from their purses, my almanack. Within its soft paper cover were hard facts: a true calendar of tides rising and falling, moons shining full to black, the arriving and departing of the sun, and all things necessary for the farmer, hunter, fisherman, sailor, and shopkeeper to arm himself for battle with nature and those forces that threatened a tranquil life.

On the loaf of bland facts baked into the bread of *Poor Richard's Almanack* I sprinkled cinnamon. A cinnamon of witticisms cleverly crafted to gently convey fundamental truths of life's commerce and life's passions. To many a reader these witticisms seemed to have no more stature than a court jester before a King. But as you would say, "A sugarcoated pill is easier to swallow."

Residing within each witticism, a kernel of fundamental truth. A truth so obvious that it was, for many, of no weight; hence, no need to pay it a mind or a courtesy. But these diminutive-appearing truths not acknowledged and acted upon might well, in time, rise up and smite those who did not make them honored lifelong guests. Alas, dear Americans, this be true for many of you . . . you



live season to season, year to year, without the guests of reason.

As slowly I became not a young man I grew in wisdom; I was not an educated lad, any change in wisdom could only be to my betterment. With my self-proclaimed new wisdom I undertook to burden *Poor Richard's Almanack* not only with facts and witticisms, but with topical essays penned by me. Essays that spoke to the forces and prejudices of commerce, governments, religions, and peoples. New topical essays addressing these same issues are, I trust, the thick bones of this narrative.

What follows is *Poorer Richard's America*, written for today's citizens of America. Please, let me beg your pardon. Truly I know how immodest of me to pen essays that expound upon your faults and problems. I take this presumption to my bosom and suffer the honest criticism that is due because I love America so . . . I was there for its birth. And truly I love all Americans. No more noble people have walked God's good earth. But your greatness, your generosity, your quick rush to right all wrongs, and your intolerance of the suffering of others will in time extinguish your ability to exercise America's most exquisite nobility.

Know well, dear reader, that those kindhearted benevolent qualities of America, those sterling attributes that are such a part of your greatness, will if not bridled with financial restraint and reasonableness cause "Greatest" to slowly fade from our Country's honored title.

*"If emotion drives, let reason hold the reins."*

*Poor Richard's; May 1749*

Thy obliged friend and fellow citizen.