Lightning Caught:
“A Republic, If You Can Keep It”

Sometimes, in exactly the right conditions, compact molecules of air bounce and collide with one another within clouds. Their collisions produce static energy, a force brought about by friction in the air. Once these molecules have collided enough, they charge the air around them with a tremendous electrical current. From this, a singular spark from which all else follows. From a beginning so small as to be invisible, the negative electrostatic discharge erupts out of the cloud and shoots downwards, drawn towards the positive attraction of the ground. The sky erupts, radiating with a brilliant blue and white crack that splits the atmosphere into a thousand pieces. It strikes with a power exceeding the temperature of the sun’s surface, capable of setting alight that which it touches. It is a violent jolt that begins merely from an imbalanced collection of particles. Lightning, then, begins humbly. But from a flash of brilliance comes the cracking pang of thunder. The literal sonic shockwaves of physical disruption, and the token reminder of an enduring storm.

Perhaps two hundred and fifty years later, that storm still rages.

The torrent of revolutionary currents that electrified the eighteenth-century North American colonies had struck at the heart of an empire. After enduring the necessary toils of overthrowing their subjugated status, the nascent United States had now, from the spark of revolution, felt the heat of implementing a better union. The very revolutionary idealism that charged the static air of a choking colony now stewarded a spark difficult to keep alight. The American experiment had been set in motion. There was perhaps none who understood this better than Benjamin Franklin.

Franklin had indeed been fascinated by storms earlier in his life. He had spent much of his time devoted to the study of natural electricity; chasing storms on horseback in hopes of glimpsing the unparalleled magnitude of lightning. An awe-inspiring sight, no doubt, that flickered his mind with the spark of invention. Well versed in its power, Franklin must’ve experienced countless times the uneasy relationship shared between the realm of humanity and nature. For all its immense beauty and power, lightning is feral and fierce, and innately dangerous to those unprepared to face it. Houses, ships, and structures could be damaged and burnt; people left victim to the immense charge it transferred. Franklin’s studies into lightning were surely propelled in no uncertain terms by a drive to harness and arrest this unruly energy.

The culmination of his efforts manifested in his lightning rod. A device designed to channel and conduct the strikes of lightning. Indeed, Franklin’s efforts were providential. Lightning was caught, if but for a brief moment, and society all the better for it. And while his efforts could not guarantee the surviving of a storm, it could at least tame the fires of its revolutionary provocation.

Franklin was well versed in the art of understanding. He had fluttered between scientist and statesman throughout his varied life, and his experience informed a distinctly omniscient wisdom. He applied his erudition to that which called for his attention; he had served as representative from North America to Great Britain, and, indeed, later as minister plenipotentiary to France in service of his fledgling nation. First-hand, he had seen the current

of revolution spread from the old world to the new, and having passed more than fifty years in political service, he understood all too well the charge of keeping liberty from lashing out a thunderous rage.

The lightning that struck eighteenth-century North America was impossible to ignore. It charged with extraordinary purpose a current of change to all the bodies that brought its being; charring to remains the ancient bonds of tyranny that had restrained and shackled the path of its progression. The lightning bolt that struck took political form. An infallible measure of natural passion, brought forth by providence, and enabled by a collective conduction. Without measure, and with seldom any equal. Like Franklin's own lightning rod, the nation had caught the charge. The bolt had struck at its heart, animated its course, and delivered unwieldy liberty in boundless measure to the world below. The volatile fury of an electrified impatience, so long oppressed, set forth and exploded with political brilliance and unruly radiance; exposing a glimpse of a world that knew freedom.

As Franklin, however, knew, lightning could be reckless, and a republic even more so. Like lightning, liberty could illuminate and obliterate in equal measure. Like lightning, liberty could not be controlled, only guided. And like the fires it brought, this political lightning came as responsibility more than comfort. Harnessing the current revealed only its duplicity; the goal of republic set alight a blaze that if not tended to, would burn rather than shine. Freedom was, then, from its immediate inception vulnerable. Like lightning, liberty could neither be owned nor caught; merely kept. Without its stewards, he realised, the charge may leave altogether. And where capturing the spark of the republic befell the responsibility of a few, the duty of its upkeep befalls all, then as now. Liberty was delivered but bound with duty. To its upkeep, Franklin charged posterity: *"A republic, if you can keep it"*.

Where then do we now find ourselves? In that same republic? With the same storms looming?

Two hundred and fifty years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and that first capture of lightning, Franklin's charge remains ever pertinent. The experiment is ongoing; the republic remains enabled by those same charged bodies that brought it to life, and little else. Lightning has served as a mechanism through which to interpret this singular moment of creation in history. A bolt may last less than a second; political arrangements a blink on the earth to which they belong. The continual energetic transfer of a political charge, then, is itself necessary. Each individual body, charged and propelled, encourages lightning to be caught once more. For us, a republic, if we can keep it, is a bolt worth catching.

Franklin understood that a singular lightning rod could not shield an entire town. Protection was the result of many rods standing together, tended to and maintained by many hands. Every citizen can conduct this political charge. So too is the republic indefensible by one but maintained by the many hands that grasp it and shape its course. Through that circuit of duty and cooperation, the current of liberty flows.

The storm rages on. We cannot control it, but we can steady the society that must withstand it. The lightning that struck two hundred and fifty years ago does not belong only to those who first caught its spark. The republic it brought endures as the charge of its inheritors. And though perhaps the clouds will darken again, and lightning may gather with tests anew, liberty remains - like electricity - awaiting the conductors primed to guide its charge. For that

current of freedom resides in the charge of humanity, of our duty and cooperation and resolve in its protection. For lightning was caught two hundred and fifty years ago, and it can be caught again. Franklin's charge remains: "a republic, if you can keep it".