

Benjamin Franklin once stated, “That as we enjoy great Advantages from the Inventions of others, we should be glad of an Opportunity to serve others by any Invention of ours, and this we should do freely and generously.” Franklin's quote explains that “we” - American citizens - enjoy plentiful advantages from inventions that “others”, inventors, have made and shared. Therefore, we should be inclined to “freely and generously”, with the best interests of the people rather than profit, share inventions of “ours”, citizens with ideas for innovation, for the betterment of society. Franklin is not ordering people to live by his words, but rather he is presenting a philosophy. Inventions throughout time such as Franklin's invention of the lightning rod in 1750, the three-point seatbelt in 1950, and GPS navigation in 2000 all demonstrate the applicability of Franklin’s idea in 2023.

Franklin’s statement in his Autobiography was not vague posturing: he never patented his inventions and always shared them with society. When Franklin invented the lightning rod in 1750, he did so with the best intentions of Americans in mind. “By 1750, in addition to wanting to prove that lightning was electricity, Franklin began to think about protecting people, buildings, and other structures from lightning. This grew into his idea for the lightning rod” (The Franklin Institute). Franklin chose not to patent his invention because he wanted it to be used worldwide to protect people and structures from lightning. However, Franklin’s definitions of “free” and “generous” have changed as America has introduced democratic capitalism. Nowadays, the United States Economy is highly competitive as the system centers around individual profit. An article from Lumen Learning states, “Proponents of capitalism have argued that indices of economic freedom correlate strongly with higher income.” People today are more likely to patent their inventions because of the way our economy works. If an invention is patented, one can make a profit from that invention while others can not. Since the economy evolved from when Franklin first invented the lightning rod to 2023, the meaning of free and generous inventions has changed. It is not so much about not patenting a product, but instead, allowing others to benefit from its creation. Franklin's philosophy could also be seen in inventions such as the three-point seat belt.

The three-point seatbelt, seen in almost all modern-day vehicles, was invented by Volvo engineer, Nils Bohin in 1950. Volvo mirrors Franklin’s generosity on their website: “Although the design was patented, the company decided the patent was to be left open, making it available

to all vehicle manufacturers to use for free”. This decision saved many lives as this new seatbelt design was much safer than the preceding two-point design. Bohin, through Volvo, shared their invention with the world freely without patenting the design, so that drivers everywhere would have increased the “Great advantage” of safer driving. From 1950 up to modern times, each time we drive, our safety is built on this commitment to generous scientific sharing - a commitment that also extends into our current century.

GPS, or Global Positioning System, is a modern-day tool integrated into almost all electronics. However, it was not until 2000 that it was shared freely with the people. “Before the year 2000, the U.S. government had actually been scrambling signals within the GPS network. Now, with the approval of the government, anyone with a receiver would be able to get accurate location information using GPS tech” (The Boss Magazine). GPS is beneficial to the general public in the way of helping to navigate from place to place, mapping out an area, and determining a specific spot by way of location. In this century, it is uncommon to get lost on the road on account of GPS. Because of the generous sharing of science from the government into the free-market industry, our lives are forever changed for the better.

Modern life should continue to move forward following the philosophy of Benjamin Franklin by adapting to it in terms of the current economy and government. Inventions should continue to be shared by the government or inventors into the free market. There is strong evidence of how this philosophy can be applied through the lightning rod, the three-point seatbelt, and GPS. Franklin was a self-made man who built up his reputation and wealth not by selfishness, but by generosity. He applied his wisdom and learning to his philosophy many years ago, but it can still provide a platform for prosperity now.

Works Cited

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