Benjamin Rush had never shied away from controversy before, and he wasn’t about to start now, when so much was at stake. The delegates of Pennsylvania were debating whether to ratify the new Constitution, and Rush believed strongly that doing so was the right thing. Well-traveled and educated, the professor of chemistry was used to speaking in front of large crowds. He would not mince words.

Indeed, the controversial physician had a reputation for speaking his mind even to the point of tactlessness. But as a doctor as well as a Patriot, his fearless attitude led to the advancement of science, social reform, and ultimately the birth of a new national government.

**Background**

One of seven children, Benjamin Rush was born near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on December 24, 1745. His father died when he was eight years old, and his care was entrusted to an aunt and uncle. He entered his uncle’s academy, and excelled in his studies. Five years later, he enrolled in the junior class at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University). He graduated when he was barely fifteen.

After debating whether to study theology, law, or medicine, Rush decided to become a physician. For the next five years, he studied with Dr. John Redmond while attending lectures at the College of Philadelphia. In 1766, he traveled to Scotland to continue his studies at the world-renowned University of Edinburgh. He graduated two years later at age twenty-three. He then chose to continue his training in London and Paris. During that year, Rush became friends with Benjamin Franklin.

Rush returned to Philadelphia in 1769. Almost immediately he was named the first professor of chemistry in America at the College of Philadelphia. He quickly went to work launching his own medical practice. He gained a good reputation in the city, first treating the poor and then expanding his practice. Some of his techniques were controversial, such as bloodletting, while others were innovative and effective.

**An Outspoken Leader**

Throughout his career, Rush pursued interests outside of medicine as well. He supported the revolutionary cause, and called for the independence of the American colonies early on. He encouraged Thomas Paine to write on the subject of independence, and even suggested the title for the pamphlet, *Common Sense*. Rush’s own writings caught the attention of Patriots like Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. After their first meeting, Adams described him as “a sprightly fellow, but too much a talker to be a deep thinker.”

Rush attended the Continental Congress in 1776. There, he called for a strong spirit of unity among the representatives and states. When delegates bickered over the power of larger colonies, Rush reminded them of their common interests. He said in his first speech in Congress, “The more a man aims at serving America the more he serves his colony. . . . We are dependent upon each other—not totally independent states. . . . When I entered that door, I considered myself a citizen of America.”

*Benjamin Rush*
Rush again made his presence and opinions known as Surgeon General of the Armies of the Middle Department during the Revolutionary War. Rush was appalled by the dreadful conditions in military hospitals, and questioned the competency of his superiors. He even challenged General George Washington. Rush took the matter to Congress. “Let our army be reformed,” he urged. “Let our general officers be chosen annually.” When Congress rejected his plea, Rush resigned.

Rush practiced medicine and lectured about social reforms until the Constitutional Convention of 1787 called him back to public life. He supported the new Constitution and worked to secure its ratification at the Pennsylvania state convention in 1787. Siding with the Federalists, he thought a bill of rights was unnecessary. “Would it not be absurd,” he asked, “to frame a formal declaration that our natural rights are acquired from ourselves?” Thanks to the efforts of Rush and James Wilson, Pennsylvania became the second state to ratify the Constitution.

Social Reform

Social issues also commanded Rush’s attention. In 1774 he helped to establish the first abolitionist society in America, the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery. In his view, slavery was inconsistent with the Declaration of Independence. He was concerned that the nation would seem hypocritical. To address this concern, he wrote pamphlets against the practice. He also supported gradual emancipation.

In addition to his efforts to oppose slavery, Rush worked to advance the status of all citizens. He strongly believed in the power of education and urged the creation of free public schools for all. He argued that future citizens of the United States, including women, needed to have a well-rounded education. He contended, “Let the ladies of a country be educated properly,” he contended, “and they will ... form its manners and character.” Rush later helped establish Pennsylvania’s Carlisle College (now Dickinson College).

As a doctor, Rush recognized that a healthy citizenry would be crucial for the development of a young country. During the yellow fever epidemics of the 1790s, Rush stayed in Philadelphia and continued to treat patients despite the obvious risks. (His patients included John and Abigail Adams.) He considered alcohol and tobacco addiction to be diseases, and he advocated abstinence as the only cure. He supported the new technique of vaccination to prevent smallpox. He pioneered treatments for the mentally ill. His groundbreaking work Medical Inquiries and Observations upon Diseases of the Mind (1812) quickly became the first textbook of psychiatry. In fact, some credit him as the Father of American Psychiatry.

In return for Rush’s service to the country, President John Adams appointed Rush as Treasurer of the U.S. Mint in 1799. He held the post until his death in 1813.

An Influential Patriot and Friend

Rush’s influence in the lives of two prominent Founders is also noteworthy. When the divisive political issues of the 1790s took their toll on the long-standing friendship of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, Rush played an instrumental role in their reconciliation. For twenty years, Rush corresponded with both men. Due in large part to Rush’s efforts, Jefferson and Adams resumed their friendship in 1812 and began a correspondence that would last the next fourteen years. Rush told Adams, “I rejoice in the correspondence which has taken place between you and your old friend Mr. Jefferson. I consider you and him as the North and South Poles of the American Revolution.”
Rush’s lifetime of study, innovation, and advocacy was aimed at improving the quality of life for all people, regardless of race, gender, education, or economic status. In the end, Rush did more than sign the Declaration of Independence. Through his works, both in medicine and politics, he demonstrated a belief in the principles of liberty and equality at the Declaration’s core. Hearing of Rush’s death in 1813, John Adams reflected, “I know of no character living or dead who has done more real good for his country.”

**Reading Comprehension Questions**

1. What three major political roles did Benjamin Rush play in the Founding of the United States?
2. List five social reforms that Rush encouraged.
3. To which office did President Adams appoint Rush?

**Critical Thinking Questions**

4. In what ways do you think Benjamin Rush was ahead of his time?
5. Throughout his life, Benjamin Rush consistently challenged widely accepted ideas and practices. What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing so?