

Benjamin's Mystery Soup

It was a beautiful spring day on Friday, on the fifth of June, in Munich, Germany in the year 1784. A smart-looking horse and carriage came to a stop on the fashionable *Schwabinger* Street in front of a palatial villa. The carriage had a single rider, obviously a person of importance if one were to judge by his clothing. The distinguished occupant was the 32-year-old Benjamin Thompson, recently knighted *Sir Benjamin Thompson* by King George III of Great Britain. Just having taken the oath of office as a colonel in the Bavarian army, he was basking in the joy of the moment. He chuckled to himself as he strode towards the entrance to his villa, thinking, "Little do the Bavarians know what is in store for them! When I complete my plan to reform the military, everything will change." The Elector of Bavaria, Karl Theodor, had not so long ago employed him as a colonel of one of the cavalry regiments of the army. In reality, though, Sir Benjamin had been given the post to become a troubleshooter for the army. The low-level position was a cover, and Karl Theodor had advised Sir Benjamin to take the time to learn German and French and gain detailed knowledge of the local situation before offering any advice.

Sir Benjamin took his role very seriously, but he was also ruthlessly ambitious. Over the next four years, he observed, made hypotheses, collected data, made measurements, and conducted experiments designed to offer solutions for the dire situation of the Bavarian society. It was one of the most exhilarating periods in Sir Benjamin's life, which he affirmed in a letter to his friend, Lord George Germain, the following summer: "I can say with truth that I hardly know what there is left for me to wish for. Rank, Titles, Decorations, Literary distinctions, and with some small degree of military fame I have acquired, the road is open to me for the rest." He had the freedom to work as he liked, and because no one knew his mission, he was free of criticism or opposition. Little did Sir Benjamin know both the fame and the opposition that awaited him.

Bavaria was beset by a veritable cancer of misery and lawlessness, and the army had become a hotbed of crime and disorder. The common soldier was not paid enough to survive, and there was much corruption, theft, and inhumanity in the army. Benjamin was shocked to discover that the peasant farmers feared military conscription so much that they would flee to the forest or even cut off a finger or two with an axe so as not to be forced into duty by the dreaded recruiting officers. In a lengthy and detailed document prepared for the Elector, Sir Benjamin expressed his deep criticism of the situation and suggested a radical and complete system of reform of the military. As a

foreigner, the American-born Briton, Sir Benjamin could say things that no Bavarian dared say. Finally, on the seventh of February, almost four years after his appointment as colonel, Sir Benjamin completed his detailed plan in the form of a memorandum, "Pro Memoria," and presented it to the Elector.

To Benjamin's delighted surprise, Karl Theodor was not only impressed by his proposals, but motivated to put the plan into action immediately. Here, finally, was someone who was not only offering to clean up the mess but had a detailed plan of how it had to be done. Fortunately, being the Elector, Karl Theodor had the power to give Sir Benjamin *carte blanche*. Benjamin went home that night elated, but not knowing quite what to think. How would this all come about?

A few days later, Karl Theodor summoned Sir Benjamin to his court. The Elector announced to all assembled: "Today, I announce the firing of the Minister of War, Count Belderbusch. I am here-with appointing Sir Benjamin Thompson the Minister of War, the Minister of Police, promoting him to the rank of Major General, and appointing him as Chamberlain of the Court and State Councillor, with full powers to act in all these capacities. The Court erupted in pandemonium. Some turned deathly white; others shouted, "Here, here," and broke out into applause. Karl Theodor turned to Benjamin and said, "Sir Benjamin, would you kindly address the court and describe the gist of your proposals?"

Benjamin's mouth was dry, and he spoke somewhat hoarsely: "Eminent Sir; esteemed ladies and gentlemen of the court, in formulating my proposals, I was ever mindful of that great and important truth that no political arrangement can be really good except insofar as it contributes to the general good of society. I have endeavored to unite the interest of the soldier with the interest of civil society and to render the military force, even in times of peace, subservient to the public good. In short, my plan aims to make the soldiers citizens, and the citizens soldiers. The army will become the people's army, well paid, clothed, housed, taught, occupied, and entertained—more so than any army has ever seen." "Here, here!" bellowed Karl Theodor, barely able to contain his enthusiasm. The entire court applauded—but only politely. Karl Theodor's enthusiasm was, obviously, not shared by everyone. One person, in particular, had turned fiery red and was shaking as he spoke—it was Count Belderbusch: "Eminent sir, I respectfully submit my disagreement with the new proposals. They will turn the soldiers into gardeners and peddlers and remove their self-respect and military preparedness. It will be a disaster!" The entire court turned silent. No one had ever dared challenge the Elector like this, before. It was, however, of no consequence at the moment, as the Elector's decision was final.

The first action of the newly appointed Minister of War was to issue an edict forbidding profiteering among the military officers. He achieved the desired response—a mass resignation at all levels. After the resignations had run their course, Sir Benjamin promoted all the remaining officers. Now, the new normal in the military was a group of happy officers. Quite a change! Next, Sir Benjamin created permanent stations for the various regiments so as to eliminate the roving thievery and turn their activities to more productive use, first to rid the countryside of all tramps, beggars, vagrants, and smugglers. In the following three-and-a-half years, the troops arrested nearly 10,000 persons. Sir Benjamin's motivation was not just security; it was, primarily, to create a work force for his new "military workhouses"—factories to produce goods, such as clothing for the military to reduce the cost of its operations. Then, he encour-

aged the soldiers to work for their own profit in the considerable spare time that they had available. To every garrison Sir Benjamin attached a "military garden" for the purposes of growing food for the military. Not only did the soldiers grow food for themselves and their families as one of their regular duties, but they expanded those efforts to produce crops that they sold for profit.

Even though the reforming of the army was a great success and the number of beggars on the streets had been significantly reduced, the core of destitute beggars was still present. Deeply disturbed by their plight, Sir Benjamin placed his observations on record: "Young children [are] stolen from their parents and their eyes put out or their tender limbs torn and distorted, in order, by exposing them thus maimed, to excite the pity and commiseration of the public." The terrible situation justified drastic measures, so he decided that on the coming New Year's Day all the beggars would be arrested, registered, and told, first, that begging was now outlawed, and second, that a paying job with food and good working conditions was awaiting them at the military workhouse. It was a bold and risky experiment.

Early in the morning on New Year's Day, Sir Benjamin, with a large contingent of army officers, soldiers, and magistrates of the city, gathered at the Munich City Hall. Despite the new law, beggars immediately emerged from the side streets and began to plead for charity, as they traditionally did on the first day of the year. It was Sir Benjamin, himself, who made the first arrest. Following his example, his entourage spread out over the whole city to locate all the beggars, arresting them and bringing them back to City Hall to be registered. In an hour they had arrested all the beggars they could find—2600! That day marked the transformation of the city of Munich.

The next morning, the by-now-former beggars began showing up at the workhouse, where they found a warm environment, hot meals, teachers to teach them their jobs, and payment at the day's end. Although the first few days contained scenes of mass confusion at times, the inexperienced workers settled into their new jobs with a certain degree of satisfaction. Sir Benjamin's bold experiment had turned out to be another success.

The soldiers in the army and workers in the workhouses had to be fed, and this was proving very costly. Sir Benjamin now wondered how he could produce and provide nourishing food at an economical cost. Because he approached every problem scientifically, he studied food from both a nutritional and economic point of view. Sir Benjamin observed that the soldiers in his re-organized army appeared healthy and robust, so he took note of and studied their diet. Because of their low income in the army, they relied heavily on the crops that they grew. Their diet consisted largely of a variety of soups containing garden produce. As a result, Sir Benjamin started experimenting with making various soups. He also experimented with new crops, such as turnips for people and clover for animals. His favorite crop, however, was the potato, which, he calculated, could be grown more economically and provide more benefit than most other crops. Sir Benjamin thought that nutritious food would result in satisfied and healthy-looking workers. He also put forward the idea that the tastiest foods are likely to be the most nutritious, an idea he had gleaned from reading the Greek philosopher Hypocrites, who had stated that “whatever pleases the palate nourishes.” These principles, along with the consideration of cost efficiency, guided Sir Benjamin’s experimentation on nutrition.

The potato was Sir Benjamin’s favorite crop, but it was not the people’s favorite in Bavaria. Indeed, everywhere in Europe there was prejudice and misinformation about the potato. It was thought to be poisonous and cause some of the worst diseases. Obviously, his factory workers or soldiers would not touch their food if they thought it contained potatoes. So, Sir Benjamin had a special room constructed beside the kitchen in which he secretly stored and prepared potatoes. The cooks who were allowed to enter this room were sworn to secrecy. After much experimentation, Sir Benjamin was able to produce his favorite soup recipe, which he carefully recorded: “Water and peeled barley are put together in a saucepan, and brought to a boil. Peas are added, and the boiling continued for two hours; then raw, peeled potatoes are added, and the boiling continued for another hour, stirring the contents of the saucepan

frequently with a large wooden spoon. Finally, some vinegar, salt, and immediately before serving, pieces of fine wheat bread are added (everything in proper proportions).”

At first, the cooks had to be very careful that the potatoes were cooked and stirred so as not to leave any solid chunks of potato. Of course, the soup was served without telling anyone that it contained potatoes. The workers loved the new soup. It was, truly, Sir Benjamin’s mystery soup. Only later Sir Benjamin announced to them that it contained potatoes. They would have had objections to this earlier, but now they had gotten used to the soup, and no one complained or rejected it. He had, unknowingly, invented the soup kitchen.

With everyone in the workhouse and in the army barracks having become accustomed to the new soup, Benjamin issued seed potatoes to the soldiers to plant in the various gardens. They made sure that the gardens remained untended for certain time periods so that the neighboring farmers could investigate what was growing there and help themselves to some of the potatoes, planting them in their own gardens, instead. In this way, the use and popularity of the potato spread throughout the Bavarian countryside.

As time went on, the opposition to Sir Benjamin’s schemes grew. Especially opposed to the changes were the Munich City Council and the officers of the army. Belderbusch, still smarting from his humiliation, continued his agitation and hostile resistance, condemning the soldiers’ meager pay, their restricted movement, and their inappropriate uniforms, which resembled those of their foe—the Imperial Army. It seemed that the conversion of soldiers to citizens had proven more successful than that of citizens to soldiers.

While the reforms were not about to be reversed or undone, Sir Benjamin found the constant criticism increasingly stressful. Hardly able to endure the anguish any longer, he finally presented a report on his work to the Elector in June of 1792 and requested an inquiry in order to dispel the accusations. Even though the findings of the Commission ruled, narrowly, in Sir Benjamin’s favor, the antagonistic, unsettled situation and allegations of maladministration proved too much for him, and he fell seriously ill and was confined

to his bed. Then, as recorded in his diary, an amazing thing happened: “Imagine ... my feelings, upon hearing the confused noise of the prayers of a multitude of people who were passing by in the streets, upon being told that it was the poor of Munich, many hundreds in number, who were going in procession to church to put up public prayers for me—public prayers for me!—for a private person!—a stranger! ... No proof could well be stronger than this, that the measures adopted for making these poor people happy were really successful.”

Despite the detractors, Karl Theodor remained loyal to Sir Benjamin and sought to devise some means of repayment for his outstanding service to Bavaria. With the recent death of Emperor Leopold, Karl Theodor had temporarily assumed the role of Vice-Regent, giving him the authority to confer the title of Imperial Count on Benjamin. The name in the title, however, was of Sir Benjamin’s choosing. In recognition of the origin of his success, he chose the name of the town in America where he got his first job and his first opportunity—Rumford, Massachusetts. So, that is how Sir Benjamin Thompson became Count Rumford and how his mystery soup became known as Rumford soup.

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