

Speeches: Benjamin Franklin Voices Support for the U.S. Constitution

By Benjamin Franklin, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.24.20

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On the last day of the Constitutional Convention, Benjamin Franklin presented a speech urging his fellow delegates to support and ratify the new Constitution. This painting by Mason Chamberlain in 1762 portrays a younger Franklin. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Philadelphia Museum of Art. Modified by Newsela Staff.

Editor's Note: The Constitutional Convention met from May to September of 1787 to debate the structure of the United States' new government. At 81 years old, Benjamin Franklin was the oldest delegate to attend. On September 17, 1787, the last day of the convention, Franklin presented the following speech. Addressed to President of the Convention George Washington, Franklin's speech outlines his feelings about the newly drawn Constitution. James Wilson, another delegate from Pennsylvania, read the speech to the group of delegates due to Franklin's declining health.

Mr. President:

I confess that there are several parts of this Constitution that I do not at present approve, but I am not sure I shall never approve them. For having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged by better information, or fuller consideration, to change opinions even on important

subjects. These opinions I once thought right, but found to be otherwise. It is therefore that, the older I grow, the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment, and to pay more respect to the judgment of others. Most men, indeed, as well as most sects in religion, think themselves in possession of all truth. Wherever others differ from them, it is so far error.

[Sir Richard] Steele, a Protestant, in a dedication, tells the Pope, that the only difference between our churches, in their opinions of the certainty of their doctrines, is this: "the Church of Rome is infallible, and the Church of England is never in the wrong." But though many private persons think almost as highly of their own infallibility as of that of their sect, few express it so naturally as a certain French lady. In a dispute with her sister, she said, "I don't know how it happens, sister, but I meet with nobody but myself that is always in the right — *il n'y a que moi qui a toujours raison.*"

"It Is Likely To Be Well Administered"

In these sentiments, Sir, I agree to this Constitution, with all its faults, if they are such. I think a General Government necessary for us, and there is no form of government, but what may be a blessing to the people if well administered. And I believe further, that this is likely to be well administered for a course of years, and can only end in tyranny, as other forms have done before it. At such time, the people shall become so corrupted as to need such despotic government, being incapable of any other.

I doubt, too, whether any other Convention we can obtain may be able to make a better Constitution. For, when you assemble a number of men to have the advantage of their joint wisdom, you inevitably assemble with those men all their prejudices, their passions, their errors of opinion, their local interests and their selfish views. From such an assembly can a perfect production be expected? It therefore astonishes me, sir, to find this system approaching so near to perfection as it does.

I think it will astonish our enemies, who are waiting with confidence to hear that our councils are confounded ... and that our states are on the point of separation, only to meet hereafter for the purpose of cutting one another's throats. Thus I consent, Sir, to this Constitution, because I could expect no better, and I am not sure that it is not the best.

"The Strength Of Any Government Depends On Opinion"

The opinions I have had of its errors I sacrifice to the public good. I have never whispered a syllable of them abroad. Within these walls they were born, and here they shall die. If every one of us, in returning to our constituents, were to report the objections he has had to it ... we might prevent its being generally received. We thereby might lose all the salutary effects and great advantages resulting naturally in our favor among foreign nations as well as among ourselves, from our real or apparent unanimity. Much of the strength and efficiency of any government, in procuring and securing happiness to the people, depends on opinion — on the general opinion of the goodness of the government, as well as of the wisdom and integrity of its governors. I hope, therefore, that for our own sakes, as a part of the people, and for the sake of future generations, we shall act heartily and unanimously in recommending this Constitution (if approved by Congress and confirmed by the Conventions) wherever our influence may extend, and turn our future thoughts and endeavors to the means of having it well administered.

On the whole, Sir, I cannot help expressing a wish that every member of the Convention, who may still have objections to it ... doubt a little of his own pride, and to make manifest our unanimity, put his name to this instrument.