

PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES, *CONTINUED***from Debates on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution**

Benjamin Franklin was one of the oldest delegates at the Constitutional Convention in 1787. He used his influence to remind the younger men of the importance of compromise. Franklin delivered the following speech near the end of the convention. James Madison wrote it down as it was read.

The engrossed⁴ Constitution being read, Dr. Franklin rose with a speech in his hand, which he had reduced to writing for his own convenience, and which Mr. Wilson read in the words following:

“Mr. President: I confess that there are several parts of this Constitution which 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, which 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.... But though many private persons think almost as highly of their own infallibility⁵ as that of their sect,⁶ few express it so naturally as a certain French lady, who, in a dispute with her sister, said, ‘I don’t know how it happens, sister, but I meet with nobody but myself that is always in the right.’...

“In these sentiments, sir, I agree to this Constitution, with all its faults, if they are such; because 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 believe further, that this is likely to be well administered for a course of years, and can only end in despotism, as other forms have done before it, when the people shall become so corrupted as to need despotic government, being incapable of any other.... Thus I consent, sir, to this Constitution, .

because I expect no better, and because I am not sure, that it is not the best. The opinions that 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....

“On the whole, sir, I cannot help expressing a wish that every member of the Convention, who may still have objections to it, would with me, on this occasion, doubt a little of his own infallibility, and, to make manifest our unanimity, put his name to this instrument.” He then moved that the Constitution be signed by the members.

from *Debates on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, ed. by Jonathan Elliot (Philadelphia, 1861). Reprinted in *Eyewitness to America*, ed. by David Colbert (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 100–103.

4. **engrossed:** clean version of a document.

5. **infallibility:** incapable of error.

6. **sect:** a religious group.



Name _____ Date _____

PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES, *CONTINUED*

CRITICAL THINKING

1. Find Main Ideas What is Franklin's opinion of the proposed Constitution?

2. Analyze Points of View What point is Franklin making with the comment about the French lady?

3. Draw Conclusions What is Franklin's point when he says that "there is no form of government, but what may be a blessing to the people if well administered?"

4. Summarize What is Franklin urging the members of the convention to do?

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