“Z,” Boston Independent Chronicle, 6 December 1787

Mess’rs. Adams & Nourse, When I read Dr. franklin’s address to the President of the late Convention, in the last Monday’s Gazette, I was at a loss to judge, till I was informed by mere accident, from which of the contending parties it went to the press. “I confess,” says the Doctor, (and observe the Printers tell us it was immediately before his signing) “I confess that I do not entirely approve of this Constitution at present.” Surely, I thought, no zealous foederalist, in his right mind, would have exposed his cause so much as to publish to the world that this great philosopher did not entirely approve the Constitution at the very moment when his “hand marked” his approbation of it; especially after the foederalists themselves had so often and so loudly proclaimed, that he had fully and decidedly adopted it. The Doctor adds, “I am not sure I shall never approve it.” This then is the only remaining hope of the foederalists, so far as the Doctor’s judgment is or may be of any service to their cause, that one time or another he may approve the new Constitution.

Again, says the Doctor, “In these sentiments 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,” But are we to accept a form of government which we do not entirely approve of, merely in hopes that it will be administered well? Does not every man know, that nothing is more liable to be abused than power. Power, without a check, in any hands, is tyranny; and such powers, in the hands of even good men, so infatuating is the nature of it, will probably be wantonly, if not tyrannically exercised. The world has had experience enough of this, in every stage of it. Those among us who cannot entirely approve the new Constitution as it is called, are of opinion, in order that any form may be well administered, and thus be made a blessing to the people, that there ought to be at least, an express reservation of certain inherent unalienable rights, which it would be equally sacrilegious for the people to give away, as for the government to invade. . . .

The Doctor says, he is “not sure that this [is] not the best Constitution that we may expect.” Nor can he be sure that it might not have been made better than it now is, if the Convention had adjourned to a distant day. that they might have availed themselves of the sentiments of the people at large. It would have been no great condescension, even in that august Body, to have shown so small a testimony of regard to the judgment of their constituents. Would it not be acting more like men who wish for a safe as well as a stable government, to propose such amendments as would meliorate the form, than to approve it, as the Dr. would have us, “with all its faults, if they are such.” Thus the Doctor consents, and hopes the Convention will act heartily and unanimously in recommending the Constitution, wherever their influence may extend, and turn their future tho’ts and endeavors to the means of having it well administered.” Even a bad form of government may, in the Doctor’s opinion, be well administered-for, says he, there is no form of government, but what may be made a blessing to the people, if well administered. He evidently, I think, builds his hopes, that the Constitution proposed, will be a blessing to the people,—not on the principles of the government itself, but on the
possibility, that, with all its faults, it may be well administered;—and concludes, with wishing, that others, who had objections to it, would yet, like him, doubt of their own infallibility, and put their names to the instrument, to make an Unanimity manifest! No wonder he shed a tear, as it is said he did, when he gave his sanction to the New Constitution.

Canonic URL: http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/RNCN-03-14-02-0088
[accessed 04 Sep 2012]
Original source: Commentaries on the Constitution, Volume XIV: Commentaries on the Constitution, No. 2