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“Z”

Boston *Independent Chronicle*, 6 December 1787 (excerpts)

On 3 December the *Boston Gazette* published Benjamin Franklin’s last speech in the Constitutional Convention, which was delivered on 17 September. By quoting and commenting on selected passages of the speech, “Z” tried to demonstrate that Franklin had signed the Constitution even though he believed it to be seriously defective.

“A Federalist” defended Franklin’s decision to support an imperfect Constitution because the “distracted States” needed the proposed new system. James Madison described “Z’s” version of Franklin’s speech as “both mutilated & adulterated so as to change both the form & the spirit of it.”

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 fœderalist, 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 fœderalists 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 fœderalists, 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.

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