

This is not to say that all disputes were placated and that the delegates were pleased with their handiwork. On the contrary, there was much dissatisfaction and a general feeling that perhaps too much had been compromised.

The venerable Benjamin Franklin, then 80 years old, acknowledged that there was much in the constitution of which he disapproved, but he said he was not sure that he would always disapprove them. These were his words, among the wisest he ever uttered, on the Great Compromise.

“For having lived long,” he said, “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. 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. 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.”

Then Franklin asked this question: “From such an assembly can a perfect production be expected?”

He went on to say: “It therefore astonished me, sir, to find this system approaching so near to perfection as it does; and I think it will astonish our enemies, who are waiting with confidence to hear that our councils are confounded like those of the builders of Babel; and that our states are on the point of separation, only to meet hereafter for the purpose of cutting one another’s throats. Thus,” he said, “I consent to this constitution because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best. . . .”

Franklin ended his speech by appealing to those around him who still, like himself, harbored some objections to the constitution, to “doubt a little about (their) infallibility” and in unanimity put their mines to the instrument.

There is, I think, as much to be learned about the art of politics — about the science of people governing themselves — in the proceedings at the Constitutional Convention as there is in the document that was produced there. For one thing, there is the lesson to those of us who may be inclined toward self-interest to protect the weak from the strong, the small from the great.