By 1787, Ben Franklin was a respected senior statesman who had been an influential publisher, scientist, and diplomat. He was a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, and his participation helped to give the Constitution legitimacy. After the failures of the federal government created by the Articles of Confederation, many Americans were suspicious of the Constitution and feared that it would fail as well. Franklin believed otherwise, as he states in this speech given at the conclusion of the convention.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Forming and Supporting Opinions
Do you think Franklin’s call to put aside differences and unanimously support the Constitution was practical and necessary, or was it undemocratic and intended to stifle open debate? Why?

MR. PRESIDENT,

I confess, that I do not entirely approve of this Constitution at present; but, Sir, I am not sure I shall never approve it; for, having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged, by better information or fuller consideration, to change my 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 of others. Most men, indeed, as well as most sects in religion, think themselves in possession of all truth, and that wherever others differ from them, it is so far error. Steele, a Protestant, in a dedication, tells the Pope, that the only difference between our two churches in their opinions of the certainty of their doctrine, is, the Romish Church 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, who, in a little dispute with her sister, said, “But I meet with nobody but myself that is always in the right.” “Je ne trouve que moi qui aie toujours raison.”

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 I believe, farther, 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. 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; 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 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 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, and endeavour to gain Partisans in support of them, we might
prevent its being generally received, and thereby lose all the salutary effects and
great advantages resulting naturally in our favour 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
that government, as well as of the wisdom and integrity of its governors. I hope,
therefore, for our own sakes, as a part of the people, and for the sake of our
posterity, that we shall act heartily and unanimously in recommending this
Constitution, wherever our Influence may extend, and turn our future thoughts
and endeavours 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, 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.

Source: Benjamin Franklin: Writings, edited by J. A. Leo Lemay (New York:
THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER
Students may answer that Franklin’s call to put aside differences and unanimously support the Constitution was practical and necessary because it represents the best possible compromise among different interests and because the nation needed a national government in order to survive. Franklin also notes that it is impossible to write a Constitution with which anyone is in complete agreement. Some may feel that Franklin’s call to put aside differences and unanimously support the constitution was undemocratic and stifled debate because it urged the convention members not to discuss publicly their objections to the Constitution. Others might argue that free and open public debate, while it might take a long time, is necessary to achieve a truly democratic Constitution and that perhaps the existing Constitution was not the best possible compromise.