

AMERICA: IMPERFECT, BY DESIGN

KITE & KEY
MEDIA

[SCRIPT]

Philadelphia, 1787.

55 representatives have come from throughout the young nation to establish a new form of government.¹ They're about to put the final touches on what we'll come to know as the Constitution of the United States.

Those representatives came from everywhere ... except Rhode Island. The Ocean State steadfastly opposed the Constitutional Convention and refused to send delegates. This owed in part to the fact that Rhode Island politics was dominated by populists who had gone on a money-printing spree (a power they were worried the federal government would take away from them). Battered by runaway inflation and the prospect of trade barriers with the other states, Rhode Island finally became the last of the original colonies to ratify the Constitution ... after 2 ½ years and 11 failed attempts.



R. I. BANKNOTE

1786

What are they thinking as they stand on the precipice of this defining historical moment?

Are they thinking that they'll set an example of freedom for people around the world?

Are they thinking that they're witnessing the birth of a nation that will someday be the most powerful on the globe?

Actually, at least one of them – a very famous one of them – is thinking, "It's possible that our whole plan here kinda sucks."

Ben Franklin, ladies and gentlemen.

[OPENING SEQUENCE]

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Here at Kite & Key, we make no secret about our affection for Benjamin Franklin.

Named the company in his honor.

Made [a whole video](#) about him.

Forced every member of the staff to get this haircut.



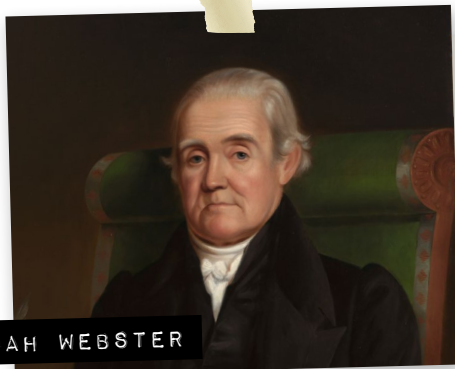
Yeah, there were lawsuits.

Now, don't get us wrong. We're not saying Benjamin Franklin was perfect or even particularly close. After all, this is the guy who wanted to remove the letter C from the alphabet.ⁱⁱ

And the letter J.

And the letters Q, W, X, and Y.

Yeah, we don't get it either.



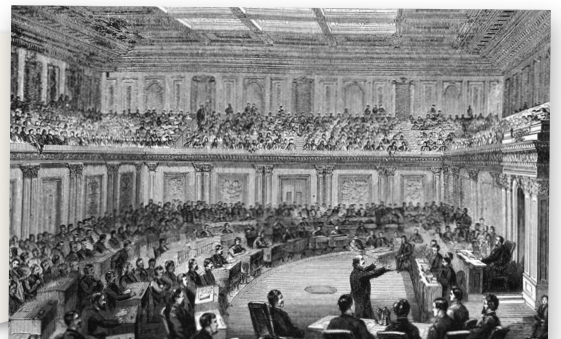
NOAH WEBSTER

One person who did get it: [Noah Webster](#), the famous dictionary author, who came to be a supporter of Franklin's suggested reforms. Franklin's proposal rested on the idea that English should become a phonetic language wherein every letter would correspond to only one sound. This plan wasn't entirely reductive, however. Franklin also proposed the creation of six new letters. One of the reasons the plan never caught on, however, was that no one had the type blocks to illustrate his new characters.

But here's the thing: One of Benjamin Franklin's best traits was that *he knew he wasn't perfect*. Here's what we mean:

When America's Founders gathered in Independence Hall to write the Constitution, Franklin was 81 years old.ⁱⁱⁱ And while today that would make him **the youngest member of the U.S. Senate**, back then it meant that he was the senior statesman at the Constitutional Convention, the person whose opinion commanded the most respect in that room.

Today's Congress is [older than it's ever been](#). In 2013, the median age of members of the House was 58, while the median age in the Senate was 65. To some degree, this is just the legislative branch mirroring the broader societal trend of increasing life expectancies. Analysis from the [Congressional Research Service](#), however, also shows that members of Congress now have longer careers on average than they used to and are much more likely to pursue repeated re-election bids.



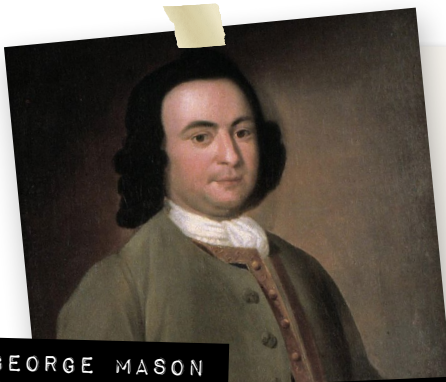
And that's why it's notable that the very first thing Benjamin Franklin said when it came time to vote on the Constitution ... was that he didn't "entirely approve" of it.^{iv} But here's what's interesting: Franklin didn't bring up his objections to explain why he was voting against the Constitution; he brought them up to explain why he was voting for it. Because the *second* thing he said was ... that his opinion might be wrong.

One of the lessons age and experience had taught him, he told the delegates, was that just because something isn't *perfect* doesn't mean that it can't be good. So, despite his concerns, Franklin announced that he was supporting the Constitution "because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best."^v

Now, that may not be the world's most ringing endorsement – it's basically three stars on Yelp – but here's the thing: Those kinds of modest expectations ... are probably one of the reasons that America's Constitution has endured longer than any other on the planet.^{vi} Our system works because, like Ben Franklin, *it assumes imperfection*.

Think about it: Why does America have a system of checks and balances in which Congress, the president, and the courts can all counteract each other's powers? Because we know that presidents, members of Congress, and Supreme Court justices aren't infallible – and somebody has to be able to hold each of them to account.

Why do we have a bill of rights? Because the Founding Fathers worried that, without one, **politicians couldn't necessarily be trusted** to protect our most basic freedoms.^{vii}



GEORGE MASON

ADVOCATE FOR THE BILL OF RIGHTS

The reason that the Bill of Rights exists separate from the original Constitution is precisely because these fears won the day. During the Constitutional Convention, Federalist supporters of the Constitution argued that a bill of rights was unnecessary. That decision nearly derailed the convention. In the end, the Constitution only passed because Antifederalists – who feared that a failure to enumerate specific rights would leave the federal government with too much power – won the concession that the First Congress would add a bill of rights as a series of constitutional amendments.

In fact, America's entire system of government is designed on the assumption that we'll have to live with imperfect leadership. That's why James Madison – in many ways the intellectual architect of the Constitution – noted in his defense of the document that "enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm"^{viii} – which is a very elegant, 18th century way of saying "We're gonna elect our fair share of morons."

And let's be honest: Regardless of your political views, you probably think we've elected our fair share of morons. And yet ... we're still standing. By denying any of them too much power, we make sure that the system endures, and the country always comes out relatively unscathed on the other side.

That we got a system of government this resilient defied the odds, for another reason that Ben Franklin pointed out in Philadelphia. As he noted, delegates to the Constitutional Convention came from all over the country, bringing a wide variety of beliefs, preferences, and regional biases.^{ix} It was impossible to build a system that each one of them could endorse without reservations ... and yet they all made the concessions necessary to make it work.

And, if anything, this is something that Americans should be even more proud of today. After all, in Franklin's era, "diversity" was when a white guy from Massachusetts met up with a white guy from Connecticut.



While America's demographics have changed a lot since the Founding era, it's still the case that America's whitest state can be found in New England. In 2022, the population of Maine was 90.5% white (nearby Vermont came in at 90.4%). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, America's most diverse state - the one where any two people chosen at random would be most likely to come from two different racial and ethnic groups - is California.

Today, America spans an entire continent and is full of people from every race, religion, nationality, and walk of life. And yet, for all our differences, we still manage to make it work. It's pretty remarkable: one nation that can feel just as much like home for the bankers on Wall Street as for the musicians on Bourbon Street; for the surfers in California as for the people doing whatever it is they do in Delaware.

In reality, Delaware is best known for ... something kinda boring. The First State (yes, even its nickname is a little sleepy) is home to more than 60% of Fortune 500 companies, at least on paper. Delaware is the most popular state in the country for business incorporations, largely because it has a separate court system that specializes in corporate cases, giving investors and executives confidence that they'll be playing by predictable rules.



And the only reason this all works ... is because we embraced imperfection. Rather than trying to come up with one system that was ideal for everybody, we created a system of government that gives each of those 50 states the ability to make their own laws and cater to the needs of their own citizens. It can be messy at times, but it's also turned out to be intensely practical.

I mean, you try telling Texas what to do.

Has America fallen short of perfection? Of course. And it always will. But we've still done pretty well for ourselves ... and it's probably because Ben Franklin was onto something.

Maybe the best country to live in is one that takes into account that we all fall short sometimes; that recognizes that we have to make compromises to unite over 330 million people into a single nation. Maybe the best country to live in is one that's imperfect by design.

After all, it's served us well for nearly 250 years. And if we keep going, who knows ... maybe 3 ½ stars on Yelp someday.

[END SCRIPT]

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SOURCES:

- i [America's Founding Documents: Meet the Framers of the Constitution](#) – National Archives
- ii ["Benjamin Franklin's Phonetic Alphabet"](#) (Jimmy Stamp) – *Smithsonian Magazine*
- iii [America's Founding Documents: Meet the Framers of the Constitution](#) – National Archives
- iv ["Closing Speech at the Constitutional Convention \(1787\)"](#) (Benjamin Franklin) – National Constitution Center
- v Ibid.
- vi [Constitution FAQs](#) – National Constitution Center
- vii [The Bill of Rights: A Brief History](#) – American Civil Liberties Union
- viii [The Federalist Papers, No. 10](#) (James Madison)

ix ["Closing Speech at the Constitutional Convention \(1787\)"](#)
 (Benjamin Franklin) — National Constitution Center

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