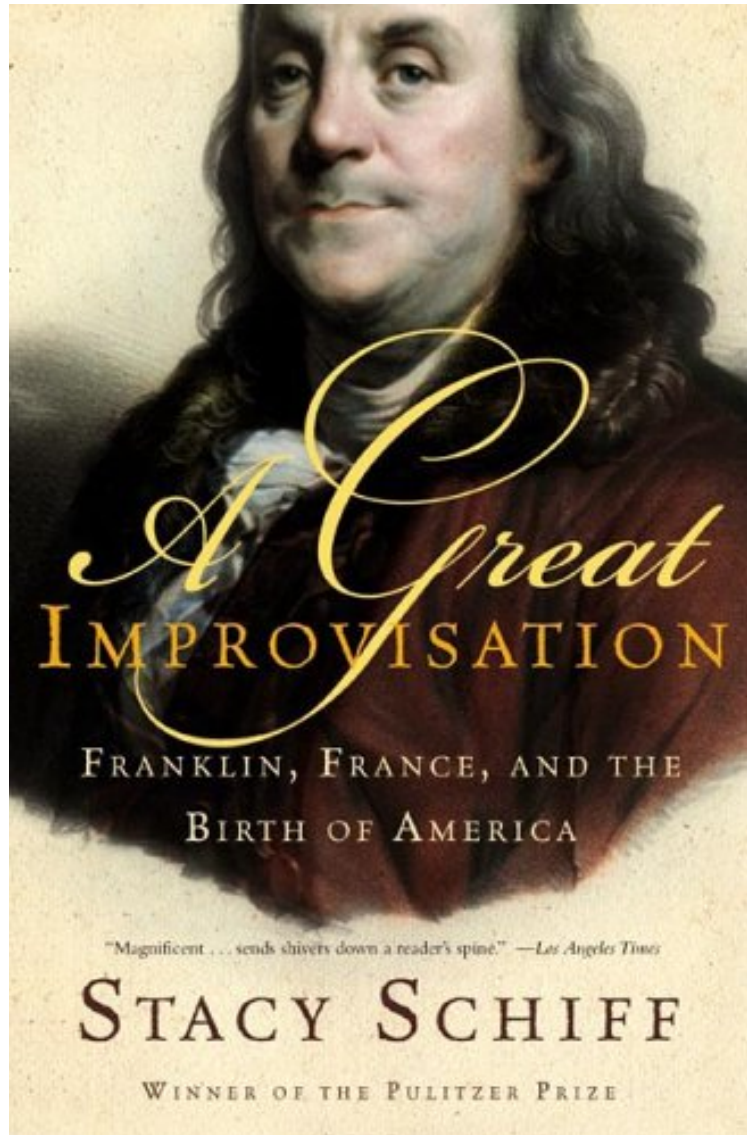


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A Great Improvisation: Franklin, France, and the Birth of America

Stacy Schiff

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0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. An Extraordinary BookBy DianaStacy Schiff is an extraordinary author! Her book, as her others, is absorbing. It was hard for me to put the book down. The story is stunning and paints a portrait of Benjamin Franklin that is remarkable.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Two StarsBy

Willard Johnsnot very readable--too convoluted0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy Rod E. SurberInteresting book worth your time for a deeper understanding of relationships involved.

In this dazzling work of history, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author follows Benjamin Franklin to France for the crowning achievement of his career."In December of 1776 a small boat delivered an old man to France." So begins an enthralling narrative account of how Benjamin Franklin--seventy years old, without any diplomatic training, and possessed of the most rudimentary French--convinced France, an absolute monarchy, to underwrite America's experiment in democracy. When Franklin stepped onto French soil, he well understood he was embarking on the greatest gamble of his career. By virtue of fame, charisma, and ingenuity, Franklin outmaneuvered British spies, French informers, and hostile colleagues; engineered the Franco-American alliance of 1778; and helped to negotiate the peace of 1783. The eight-year French mission stands not only as Franklin's most vital service to his country but as the most revealing of the man.In *A Great Improvisation*, Stacy Schiff draws from new and little-known sources to illuminate the least-explored part of Franklin's life. Here is an unfamiliar, unforgettable chapter of the Revolution, a rousing tale of American infighting, and the treacherous backroom dealings at Versailles that would propel George Washington from near decimation at Valley Forge to victory at Yorktown. From these pages emerges a particularly human and yet fiercely determined Founding Father, as well as a profound sense of how fragile, improvisational, and international was our country's bid for independence.

.com Benjamin Franklin began the "the most taxing assignment of his life" at the age of 70: to secure the aid of the French monarchy in helping the fledgling United States establish their republic. The job required tremendous skill, finesse, and discretion, and as Stacy Schiff makes clear in this brilliant book, Franklin was the ideal American, perhaps the only one, to take on the task, due in large part to his considerable personal prestige. One of the most famous men in the world when he landed in France in December 1776, his arrival caused a sensation--he was celebrated as a man of genius, a successor to Newton and Galileo, and treated as a great dignitary, even though the nation he represented was less than a year old and there were many doubts as to whether it would see its second birthday. Though he had no formal diplomatic training and spoke only rudimentary French, Franklin managed to engineer the Franco-American alliance of 1778 and the peace treaty of 1783, effectively inventing American foreign policy as he went along, in addition to serving as chief diplomat, banker, and director of American naval affairs. Franklin recognized and accepted the fact that French aid was crucial to American independence, but some Founding Fathers resented him for making America dependent on a foreign power and severely attacked him for securing the very aid that saved the cause. Schiff offers fascinating coverage of this American infighting, along with the complex political intrigue in France, complete with British spies and French double agents, secret negotiations and backroom deals. *A Great Improvisation* is an entertaining and illuminating portrait of Franklin's seven-year adventure in France that "stands not only as his greatest service to his country but the most revealing of the man." --Shawn CarkonenFrom Publishers WeeklyNumerous bestselling volumes have been written recently on the man one biography called "the first American." Pulitzer Prize-winner Schiff (for *Vladimir Nabokov*) eloquently adds to our understanding of Benjamin Franklin with a graceful, sly and smart look at his seven-year sojourn in France in his quasi-secret quest to secure American independence by procuring an alliance with the French. Drawing on newly available sources, Schiff brilliantly chronicles the international intrigues and the political backbiting that surrounded Franklin during his mission. "A master of the oblique approach, a dabbler in shades of gray," she writes, "Franklin was a natural diplomat, genial and ruthless." She deftly recreates the glittering and gossipy late 18th-century Paris in which Franklin moved, and she brings to life such enigmatic French leaders as Jacques-Donatien Chaumont, Franklin's closest adviser and chief supplier of American aid, and Charles Vergennes, the French minister of foreign affairs, who helped Franklin write the French-American Alliance of 1778. Franklin also negotiated the peace of 1783 that led not only to the independence of the colonies from Britain but also to a bond between France and America that, Schiff says, lasted until WWII. Schiff's sure-handed historical research and her majestic prose offer glimpses into a little-explored chapter of Franklin's life and American history. Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.From *The New Yorker*Yet another book on Benjamin Franklin would seem to be the last thing that anyone needs to cut down trees for right now, but this meticulously researched account captures a key moment in his history, and in ours, with verve, lan, and wit. Schiff concentrates on the years from 1776 to 1783, when, as the American commissioner in Paris, Franklin was charged with the tricky task of securing the support of monarchist France for a republican revolution. Schiff's Franklin is at once diplomat and flirt, scientist and intriguer. She shows him, above all, as a man of immense resourcefulness who mixed an idiosyncratic cocktail of courage and cynical manipulation for the highest of national, and intellectual, ends. Copyright 2005 *The New Yorker*