



Discussion Questions for *A Great Improvisation* by Stacy Schiff

1. How would you answer the question raised in the Crèvecoeur quote that opens the introduction? How would a colonist answer the question? How would a European?
2. What set Benjamin Franklin apart from other founding fathers? Did he personify “this new man” more accurately than the other founding fathers did?
3. Though charged with similar duties, Franklin and Silas Deane garnered fairly different results. Compare their diplomacy styles, and other factors affecting their mission in France. Did the fact that Franklin made the pivotal trip to France in his seventies give him an upper hand?
4. Did the negotiation tactics of John Adams enhance or undermine Franklin’s successes? Do you think Franklin is to blame for his difficulties with his colleagues, or was he simply unlucky in the company Congress sent him?
5. Many of the fascinating details culled by Stacy Schiff include the vagaries of transatlantic travel and correspondence in the eighteenth century. Vital letters ended up on the ocean floor; spies intercepted hand-delivered missives; supply ships were captured; and passengers (even Franklin, en route to the French coast in 1776) often had to endure horrifically rough voyages to cross the ocean. How has modern technology transformed diplomacy? Were there any benefits to the laborious protocol of Franklin’s era?
6. Discuss Vergennes’s motivations in negotiating with Franklin. In Vergennes’s mind, what were the political and financial ramifications of supporting the Americans? What events caused his point of view to shift? How did his motivations compare to those of private suppliers, such as Chaumont?
7. How did Benny fare as a schoolboy in Europe? In what way was his identity influenced by living there at such a formative age? Did he and Temple share their grandfather’s perception of French culture? Do you believe that Temple’s father, William, had good reason to be a Loyalist, Did he do the right thing? Did Franklin?
8. Franklin’s numerous inventions contributed to his fame throughout France, where his likeness appeared on assorted kitschy objects. Why was he more celebrated (and more properly eulogized) in France than in the colonies?
9. Discuss the women in Franklin’s life. What do you conclude about his marriage? Did American culture permit women like Madame Brillon and Madame Helvétius to exist in Franklin’s homeland? How did you react to the generations of illegitimate children marking Franklin’s lineage?
10. The title *A Great Improvisation* reminds us of the unscripted, uncharted territory in which Franklin and the patriots gambled with high stakes. How did Franklin put uncertainty to work for him? Was he a better improviser than the kings of France, Spain, and England?

11. What defenses did Franklin possess for undermining British propaganda efforts? Why do you think he—America's greatest writer and prominent publisher—wrote so little while in France?
12. The year prior to Franklin's death, French revolutionaries stormed the Bastille prison and set in motion Napoleon's rise to power. What might Franklin have thought of those events? What did he seem to think about the general concept of monarchies?
13. Did Franklin feel at home once he returned to Philadelphia? Why was he not given compensation equal to other American diplomats? Do you have sympathy for him?
14. This chapter of American history raises several provocative what-ifs: What if Franklin had not been dispatched to France? What if George Washington's wish had been fulfilled and the revolution had been fought without French troops?
15. What could the world's current political leaders learn from the aphorisms that comprise the chapter titles – All drawn from Poor Richard's Almanac--in *A Great Improvisation*?
16. Did this chapter of Franklin's life color your sense of the other, better-known adventures? Why do you think the author chose to focus on it? How does Schiff's Franklin tally with your image of him before you read *A Great Improvisation*?
17. Among the supporting cast, did you develop a fondness for any particular character?
18. Did the author approach the subject of Ben Franklin in the same way she approached the subjects of her previous biographies, *Véra (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov)* and *Saint-Exupéry*?