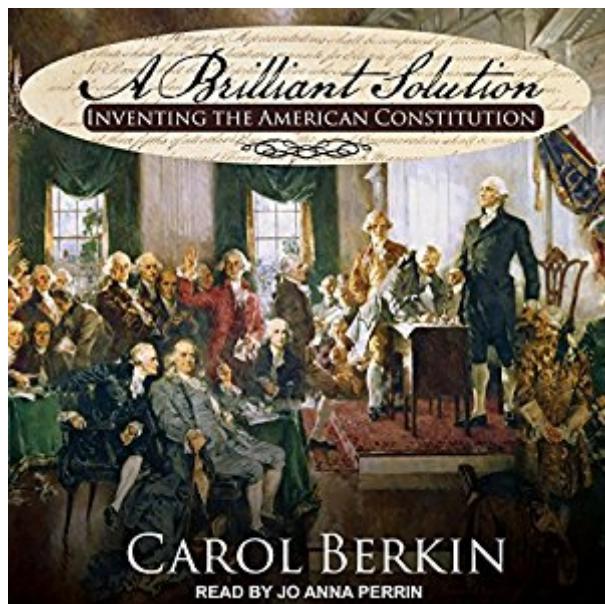


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# A Brilliant Solution: Inventing The American Constitution



## Synopsis

We know - and love - the story of the American Revolution, from the Declaration of Independence to Cornwallis' defeat. But our first government was a disaster, and the country was in a terrible crisis. So when a group of men traveled to Philadelphia in the summer of 1787 to save a nation in danger of collapse, they had no great expectations for the meeting that would make history. But all the ideas, arguments, and compromises led to a great thing: A constitution and a government were born that have surpassed the founders' greatest hopes. Revisiting all the original documents and using her deep knowledge of 18th-century history and politics, Carol Berkin takes a fresh look at the men who framed the Constitution, the issues they faced, and the times they lived in. Berkin transports the listener into the hearts and minds of the founders, exposing their fears and their limited expectations of success.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Author Carol Berkin offers a look inside the Constitutional Convention of 1787. This is a topic that has been explored a number of times in recent years. Professor Berkin, in her introduction to this book, explains that recent events, notably Bush v. Gore in 2000 and '911' in 2001 stimulated her interest in exploring, "What political crisis had the founding fathers faced, and how did they react to them. What problems did they hope to solve when they... drafted the new constitution. What role did they envision for the president and other branches...in times of calm or crisis. What dangers did they

think lay ahead for their nation?" A weighty task and one that would separate this book from many of the others. Professor Berkin discussed this book on C-SPAN.org on Nov 13, 2002 and the (42-min) video is available to stream. The read is easy - few if any prerequisites are expected of the reader for comprehension of the story to come. In fact, the book is probably aimed at a lay-audience, it dispenses altogether with citations normally used to back-up assertions, reinforce a point, or credit a source. The book concludes with brief biographic vignettes of each of the delegates, a nice touch that brings life and some comprehension for the lesser heard members of the delegation. There are occasional instances of editorial 'surprise'; Washington, "...was the only genuinely national figure attending the convention" (pg. 33) - apparently forgetting Benjamin Franklin's international renown. And on page 57, Charles Pinckney, "was willing to lie and cheat if it worked to his advantage." With no citations; a text example or two would have seemed only fair before or after dissing' Charles' reputation. Robert, "The Financier of the Revolution" Morris oddly (and awkwardly?) becomes "Bob" Morris in Berkin's narrative - and perhaps he was - but her use of the nick-name is a first among many similar accounts and the only informality ('Bill' S. Johnson? 'Chuck' Pinckney? 'Jim' Wilson? etc.) Berkin bewilders again on pg. 158 with, "Since every state constitution contained a list of guaranteed rights...a national bill of rights [was seen] as redundant." If so then Pauline Maier's brilliant, *Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution, 1787-1788*, has erred in at least three places: when it states, 1) "...nor were they likely to complain about the lack of a bill of rights, since South Carolina's 1778 constitution had none..." (pg. 250) ; and 2) "As for a bill of rights, the New York constitution also included none." (pg. 336); and 3) "Wilson had to explain why the Constitution did not, like SEVERAL state constitutions include a bill of rights" (pg.77). Wilson's (soundly logical, though emotionally ineffective) argument was that enumeration of "rights" was unnecessary (and counterproductive) because the constitution's, "authority came not from tacit implication, but from the positive grant" (pg. 78). His argument was NOT that rights would be redundant with state constitutions. Confusion, semantics, errors, or merely a different perspective? It may be a mistake for an author to define, too precisely, the object of the book; or maybe a mistake for a reader to take the objective too literally. The author's objectives with respect to the Framers reactions to modern crises went (unfortunately) undiscovered by this reader - more metaphoric in nature than literal, I suppose. Still, the read succeeds in identifying what the Framers (or founder in the case of Jefferson) thought to be the 'weak points' in the constitution and even occasionally their tepid, or dire expectations for its future, "As to the new constitution, I find myself nearly neutral..." Jefferson (pg. 181); "...Franklin believed that despotism, when it came, would be the result of the innate corruption of the people themselves" (pg. 163). Berkin reveals: the legislature

was seen as the likeliest source of 'tyranny' and the executive was no more than its servant-inscrutable only in how it would be elected, and slavery - the real 'tyranny' - went barely touched except for the 20-years its importation would be allowed to continue. Even the '3/5' rule was mere carryover from the impotent Articles of Confederation. Berkin's book is a very worthwhile read as a look at the workings of the four-months of the "Foederal Convention of 1787". A good look, but not exemplary. It is one of many such books, some of which Professor Berkin lists in, 'A Note on Sources' (pg. 298). Not included in her list is a highly recommended, five-star account that puts the Convention and its delegates under the microscope of history and political science, Clinton L. Rossiter's exceptional, 1787, The Grand Convention: The Year That Made A Nation.----kindle edition----A relatively well published e-book, faulty only in indexing and table of contents. The publisher (like most) didn't want to invest in hyperlinking the index to occurrences within the text - so removed all the page numbers, but (accidentally?) replaced them with a series of >>>,. The Table of Contents "gives up" at the end of the story-line - all afterward material is lumped under "Back" so there is no way to address: index, Note on Sources, biographies, etc. There are no illustrations in the book. Text-to-Speech is implemented, X-Ray is not (small loss). The formatting options include 3-line width settings, 3-page margin settings, 4-typefaces and 11-font sizes. e-book publication quality for Publisher Harcourt Books

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Quick read even for the lay reader, still provides solid background on the process of writing the Constitution. The actual text is only 210 pages long as the author provides short biographies for each of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention as well as copies of the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution. I found the bios particularly useful as they are organized by state and serve as an excellent reference for keeping track of all the players involved in the creation of the Constitution.

Very well done. Explains about the circumstances surrounding the reasons for the constitution and the people involved. The part about the reason for Electors, in the popular vote for the President, was very illuminating.

An important retelling of the wrangling that created the founding document. It is always an important refresher to remember the questions the founders sought to answer through the constitution in order to translate it into the contemporary culture.

An excellent resource for background introduction to the historical process and events surrounding the evolution of the Constitution. It also provides a brief summary of the background of the state delegates who participated in the Constitution's development. The author writes clearly and concisely, and I found this to be an enjoyable experience.

A Brilliant Solution is one of the best easy-read books I have read about the writing of our Constitution. The book was recommended to me by someone from the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation which is not only a living history museum but is also heavily invested in historical education. This book is easy to understand, not too lengthy and yet it clearly defines what that convention was all about. The introduction points out that even before the Convention got underway, "betting men were divided over the ability of representatives from the thirteen states to agree on anything at all. George Washington was one of the doubting Thomases." And isn't that true today? There was a lot of truth to that statement, for our framers who were still recovering from war and trying to bring a Union together through the weakness of the Articles of Confederation, also knew that if our government was given too much power, we'd end up right back where we came from - under the rule of tyranny. Berkin illustrates in this book not only the difficulty and necessity for compromise, but also the human side of the delegates as they struggled to establish this "more perfect union." I think it is important for our young readers especially, to understand the difficulties they faced, but also to understand that their ability to eventually come together was more about love of freedom and principles than it was for political or personal gain. When Benjamin Franklin left Independence Hall that day after the Constitution was signed, a lady came up to him and said, "What kind of government have you given us?" His reply: "A Republic if you can keep it." We Americans can learn a lesson from that. A healthy discussion at school should be "Why did Franklin say that and what did he mean? Just what is a republic and how DO we keep it?" Too many of our young people don't even know what our framers gave us and if they don't know, how can they possibly keep it? They can't. I would highly recommend putting this book in every school for required reading.

I have read it twice...will probably read it again.

great

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