Patriot or Spy?

Benjamin Franklin a spy? The very idea seems ludicrous; one might as well posit that George Washington abandoned Long Island in a deliberate attempt to subvert the American Revolution. Yet in his new book, *Code Number 72/Ben Franklin: Patriot or Spy?*, Historian Cecil B. Currey raises the possibility that Franklin may not have been the wholly radiant patriot sanctified in school textbooks. Basing his case on what he describes as "previously unused papers of the British Secret Service," the author concludes that in the delicate negotiatory period of 1776-1785, when Franklin was ambassador to France, the supreme diplomat "may indeed have been an enemy agent."

A professor of early American history and culture at the University of South Florida and an established Franklin scholar, Currey previously published a sober, closely documented work, *Road to Revolution/Benjamin Franklin in England, 1765-1775*. In his latest book he presents accusations by Franklin's associates that, as an envoy, he was possessed of "cunning, invention and artifice."

Such, of course, is the stuff of which diplomats, almost by definition, are made. There is no evidence anywhere of disloyalty on Franklin's part, only a compendium of examples of guilt by association with agents before and during the Revolution. But as a contemporary analogy, Henry Kissinger has surely had to deal with the same sort of men in his quest for peace in Viet Nam. At worst, Franklin was perhaps guilty—as statesmen sometimes are—of using rather shabby means to achieve estimable ends.