



Written by [John F. McManus](#) on November 6, 2000

“A Republic, if You Can Keep It”

The deliberations of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 were held in strict secrecy. Consequently, anxious citizens gathered outside Independence Hall when the proceedings ended in order to learn what had been produced behind closed doors. The answer was provided immediately. A Mrs. Powel of Philadelphia asked Benjamin Franklin, “Well, Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?” With no hesitation whatsoever, Franklin responded, “A republic, if you can keep it.”

This exchange was recorded by Constitution signer James McHenry in a diary entry that was later reproduced in the 1906 *American Historical Review*. Yet in more recent years, Franklin has occasionally been misquoted as having said, “A democracy, if you can keep it.” The NRA’s Charlton Heston quoted Franklin this way, for example, in a CBS *60 Minutes* interview with Mike Wallace that was aired on December 20, 1998.



This misquote is a serious one, since the difference between a democracy and a republic is not merely a question of semantics but is fundamental. The word “republic” comes from the Latin *res publica* — which means simply “the public thing(s),” or more simply “the law(s).” “Democracy,” on the other hand, is derived from the Greek words *demos* and *kratein*, which translates to “the people to rule.” Democracy, therefore, has always been synonymous with majority rule.

The Founding Fathers supported the view that (in the words of the Declaration of Independence) “Men ... are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” They recognized that such rights should not be violated by an unrestrained majority any more than they should be violated by an unrestrained king or monarch. In fact, they recognized that majority rule would quickly degenerate into mobocracy and then into tyranny. They had studied the history of both the Greek democracies and the Roman republic. They had a clear understanding of the relative freedom and stability that had characterized the latter, and of the strife and turmoil — quickly followed by despotism — that had characterized the former. In drafting the Constitution, they created a government of law and not of men, a republic and not a democracy.

But don’t take our word for it! Consider the words of the Founding Fathers themselves, who — one after another — condemned democracy.

- Virginia’s Edmund Randolph participated in the 1787 convention. Demonstrating a clear grasp of



Written by [John F. McManus](#) on November 6, 2000

democracy's inherent dangers, he reminded his colleagues during the early weeks of the Constitutional Convention that the purpose for which they had gathered was "to provide a cure for the evils under which the United States labored; that in tracing these evils to their origin every man had found it in the turbulence and trials of democracy...."

- John Adams, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, championed the new Constitution in his state precisely because it would not create a democracy. "Democracy never lasts long," he noted. "It soon wastes, exhausts and murders itself." He insisted, "There was never a democracy that 'did not commit suicide.'"
- New York's Alexander Hamilton, in a June 21, 1788 speech urging ratification of the Constitution in his state, thundered: "It has been observed that a pure democracy if it were practicable would be the most perfect government. Experience has proved that no position is more false than this. The ancient democracies in which the people themselves deliberated never possessed one good feature of government. Their very character was tyranny; their figure deformity." Earlier, at the Constitutional Convention, Hamilton stated: "We are a Republican Government. Real liberty is never found in despotism or in the extremes of Democracy."
- James Madison, who is rightly known as the "Father of the Constitution," wrote in *The Federalist*, No. 10: "... democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security, or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they are violent in their deaths." *The Federalist Papers*, recall, were written during the time of the ratification debate to encourage the citizens of New York to support the new Constitution.
- George Washington, who had presided over the Constitutional Convention and later accepted the honor of being chosen as the first President of the United States under its new Constitution, indicated during his inaugural address on April 30, 1789, that he would dedicate himself to "the preservation ... of the republican model of government."
- Fisher Ames served in the U.S. Congress during the eight years of George Washington's presidency. A prominent member of the Massachusetts convention that ratified the Constitution for that state, he termed democracy "a government by the passions of the multitude, or, no less correctly, according to the vices and ambitions of their leaders." On another occasion, he labeled democracy's majority rule one of "the intermediate stages towards ... tyranny." He later opined: "Democracy, in its best state, is but the politics of Bedlam; while kept chained, its thoughts are frantic, but when it breaks loose, it kills the keeper, fires the building, and perishes." And in an essay entitled *The Mire of Democracy*, he wrote that the framers of the Constitution "intended our government should be a republic, which differs more widely from a democracy than a democracy from a despotism."

In light of the Founders' view on the subject of republics and democracies, it is not surprising that the Constitution does not contain the word "democracy," but does mandate: "The United States shall guarantee to every State in this Union a republican form of government."

20th Century Changes

These principles were once widely understood. In the 19th century, many of the great leaders, both in America and abroad, stood in agreement with the Founding Fathers. John Marshall, chief justice of the Supreme Court from 1801 to 1835 echoed the sentiments of Fisher Ames. "Between a balanced republic and a democracy, the difference is like that between order and chaos," he wrote. American poet James Russell Lowell warned that "democracy gives every man the right to be his own oppressor." Lowell was



Written by [John F. McManus](#) on November 6, 2000

joined in his disdain for democracy by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who remarked that “democracy becomes a government of bullies tempered by editors.” Across the Atlantic, British statesman Thomas Babington Macaulay agreed with the Americans. “I have long been convinced,” he said, “that institutions purely democratic must, sooner or later, destroy liberty or civilization, or both.” Britons Benjamin Disraeli and Herbert Spencer would certainly agree with their countryman, Lord Acton, who wrote: “The one prevailing evil of democracy is the tyranny of the majority, or rather that party, not always the majority, that succeeds, by force or fraud, in carrying elections.”

By the 20th century, however, the falsehoods that democracy was the epitome of good government and that the Founding Fathers had established just such a government for the United States became increasingly widespread. This misinformation was fueled by President Woodrow Wilson’s famous 1916 appeal that our nation enter World War I “to make the world safe for democracy” — and by President Franklin Roosevelt’s 1940 exhortation that America “must be the great arsenal of democracy” by rushing to England’s aid during WWII.

One indicator of the radical transformation that took place is the contrast between the War Department’s 1928 “Training Manual No. 2000-25,” which was intended for use in citizenship training, and what followed. The 1928 U.S. government document correctly defined democracy as:

A government of the masses. Authority derived through mass meeting or any other form of “direct expression.” Results in mobocracy. Attitude toward property is communistic — negating property rights. Attitude of the law is that the will of the majority shall regulate, whether it be based upon deliberation or governed by passion, prejudice, and impulse, without restraint or regard to consequences. Results in demagogism, license, agitation, discontent, anarchy.

This manual also accurately stated that the framers of the Constitution “made a very marked distinction between a republic and a democracy ... and said repeatedly and emphatically that they had formed a republic.”

But by 1932, pressure against its use caused it to be withdrawn. In 1936, Senator Homer Truett Bone (D-WA) took to the floor of the Senate to call for the document’s complete repudiation. By then, even finding a copy of the manual had become almost impossible. Decades later, in an article appearing in the October 1973 issue of *Military Review*, Lieutenant Colonel Paul B. Parham explained that the Army ceased using the manual because of letters of protest “from private citizens.” Interestingly, Parham also noted that the word democracy “appears on one hand to be of key importance to, and holds some peculiar significance for, the Communists.”

By 1952 the U.S. Army was singing the praises of democracy, instead of warning against it, in Field Manual 21-13, entitled *The Soldier’s Guide*. This new manual incorrectly stated: “Because the United States is a democracy, the *majority of the people* decide how our Government will be organized and run....” (Emphasis in original.)

Yet important voices continued to warn against the siren song for democracy. In 1931, England’s Duke of Northumberland issued a booklet entitled *The History of World Revolution* in which he stated: “The adoption of Democracy as a form of Government by all European nations is fatal to good Government, to liberty, to law and order, to respect for authority, and to religion, and must eventually produce a state of chaos from which a new world tyranny will arise.”

In 1939, historians Charles and Mary Beard added their strong voices in favor of historical accuracy in their *America in Midpassage*: “At no time, at no place, in solemn convention assembled, through no



Written by [John F. McManus](#) on November 6, 2000

chosen agents, had the American people officially proclaimed the United States to be a democracy. The Constitution did not contain the word or any word lending countenance to it, except possibly the mention of 'We, the People,' in the preamble.... When the Constitution was framed no respectable person called himself or herself a democrat."

During the 1950s, Clarence Manion, the dean of Notre Dame Law School, echoed and amplified what the Beards had so correctly stated. He summarized: "The honest and serious student of American history will recall that our Founding Fathers managed to write both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution without using the term 'democracy' even once. No part of any of the existing state Constitutions contains any reference to the word. [The men] who were most influential in the institution and formulation of our government refer to 'democracy' only to distinguish it sharply from the republican form of our American Constitutional system."

On September 17 (Constitution Day), 1961, John Birch Society founder Robert Welch delivered an important speech, entitled "Republics and Democracies," in which he proclaimed: "This is a Republic, not a Democracy. Let's keep it that way!" The speech, which was later published and widely distributed in pamphlet form, amounted to a jolting wake-up call for many Americans. In his remarks, Welch not only presented the evidence to show that the Founding Fathers had established a republic and had condemned democracy, but he warned that the definitions had been distorted, and that powerful forces were at work to convert the American republic into a democracy, in order to bring about dictatorship.

Means to an End

Welch understood that democracy is not an end in itself but a means to an end. Eighteenth century historian Alexander Fraser Tytler, Lord Woodhouselee, it is thought, argued that, "A democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only exist until the voters discover that they can vote themselves largesse from the public treasury. From that moment on, the majority always votes for the candidates promising the most benefits from the public treasury with the result that a democracy always collapses over loose fiscal policy, always followed by a dictatorship." And as British writer G.K. Chesterton put it in the 20th century: "You can never have a revolution in order to establish a democracy. You must have a democracy in order to have a revolution."

Communist revolutionary Karl Marx understood this principle all too well. Which is why, in *The Communist Manifesto*, this enemy of freedom stated that "the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy." For what purpose? To "abolish private property"; to "wrest, by degrees, capital from the bourgeoisie"; to "centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the State"; etc.

Another champion of democracy was Communist Mao Tse-tung, who proclaimed in 1939 (a decade before consolidating control on the Chinese mainland): "Taken as a whole, the Chinese revolutionary movement led by the Communist Party embraces the two stages, i.e., the democratic and the socialist revolutions, which are essentially different revolutionary processes, and the second process can be carried through only after the first has been completed. The democratic revolution is the necessary preparation for the socialist revolution, and the socialist revolution is the inevitable sequel to the democratic revolution. The ultimate aim for which all communists strive is to bring about a socialist and communist society."

Still another champion of democracy is Mikhail Gorbachev, who stated in his 1987 book *Perestroika* that, "according to Lenin, socialism and democracy are indivisible.... The essence of perestroika lies in



Written by [John F. McManus](#) on November 6, 2000

the fact that *it unites socialism with democracy* [emphasis in the original] and revives the Leninist concept.... We want more socialism and, therefore, more democracy.”

This socialist revolution has been underway in America for generations. In January 1964, President Lyndon Johnson boasted in a White House address: “We are going to try to take all of the money that we think is unnecessarily being spent and take it from the ‘haves’ and give it to the ‘have nots’ that need it so much.” What he advocated, of course, was a Marxist, not an American, precept. (The way Marx put it was: “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.”) But other presidents before and after have advanced the same goal. Of course, most who support this goal do not comprehend the totalitarian consequences of constantly transferring more power to Washington. But this lack of understanding is what makes revolution by the ballot box possible.

The push for democracy has only been possible because the Constitution is being ignored, violated, and circumvented. The Constitution defines and limits the powers of the federal government. Those powers, all of which are enumerated, do not include agricultural subsidy programs, housing programs, education assistance programs, food stamps, etc. Under the Constitution, Congress is not authorized to pass any law it chooses; it is only authorized to pass laws that are constitutional. Anybody who doubts the intent of the Founders to restrict federal powers, and thereby protect the rights of the individual, should review the language in the Bill of Rights, including the opening phrase of the First Amendment (“Congress shall make no law...”).

As Welch explained in his 1961 speech:

... man has certain unalienable rights which do not derive from government at all.... And those ... rights cannot be abrogated by the vote of a majority any more than they can by the decree of a conqueror. The idea that the vote of a people, no matter how nearly unanimous, makes or creates or determines what is right or just becomes as absurd and unacceptable as the idea that right and justice are simply whatever a king says they are. Just as the early Greeks learned to try to have their rulers and themselves abide by the laws they had themselves established, so man has now been painfully learning that there are more permanent and lasting laws which cannot be changed by either sovereign kings or sovereign people, but which must be observed by both. And that government is merely a convenience, superimposed on Divine Commandments and on the natural laws that flow only from the Creator of man and man’s universe.

Such is the noble purpose of the constitutional republic we inherited from our Founding Fathers.

This article, slightly revised, originally appeared in the November 6, 2000 issue of The New American.

Photo: AP Images



Subscribe to the New American

Get exclusive digital access to the most informative, non-partisan truthful news source for patriotic Americans!

Discover a refreshing blend of time-honored values, principles and insightful perspectives within the pages of "The New American" magazine. Delve into a world where tradition is the foundation, and exploration knows no bounds.

From politics and finance to foreign affairs, environment, culture, and technology, we bring you an unparalleled array of topics that matter most.



What's Included?

- 24 Issues Per Year
- Optional Print Edition
- Digital Edition Access
- Exclusive Subscriber Content
- Audio provided for all articles
- Unlimited access to past issues
- Coming Soon! Ad FREE
- 60-Day money back guarantee!
- Cancel anytime.

Subscribe