

Democracy versus Republic

by Ken Casper

Is the United States a democracy? No, it's a republic. What's the difference?

The word democracy comes from two Greek words: *demos*, the people, and *kratein*, to rule, that is, rule by the people. It was a revolutionary concept for people to rule themselves rather than have law arbitrarily imposed on them by a dictator or king. It was a type of government developed by the Greek city-states, most famously Athens, around 500 B.C. In its simplest form, the citizens of a town assembled to discuss and debate an issue, someone proposed a law, they debated it, then everybody voted on it. If a majority agreed, it became a law.



As time went on, the number of citizens grew, the town turned into a city, and issues became more complicated. A “representative democracy” was formed. In this case, citizens divided themselves into small groups, each elected representatives who then assembled with the representatives from the other groups. They proposed and discussed new legislation until a majority of representatives agrees on a new law. The proposal was then taken to all the citizens, who voted it up or down. The point was that the final decision-makers were still the people themselves.

At about this same time, the city of Rome on the Italian peninsula was establishing a republic. The term comes from two Latin words (*res* meaning things or affairs; and *publica* which means public), thus public affairs. It incorporated the democratic process in that the citizens elected representatives. Those representatives, however, then became legislators. These senators (literally elders) formed a governing body, the senate. Senators proposed and discussed new laws among themselves, then voted on them. If a majority of the senators voted in favor, the proposal became law. The people they represented had no direct say in proposing legislation or voting on enacting it, as in a democracy or representative democracy.



The Greek democracies lasted 50-100 years. The Roman republic lasted 500! It was overthrown by a military dictator named Julius Caesar, who turned it into an empire that lasted another 400 years.

With the establishment of the Roman Empire in 23 BC, both democratic and republican forms of government essentially disappeared, to be replaced by strong men, emperors who ruled by force. The next big change came with the signing of the Magna Carta by King John of England in 1215. It was a radical document in that it limited the power of the king vis-à-vis his noble barons. Its specific provisions are obsolete today, however the principle that the king, and by inference the government, does not have unlimited authority, that its powers (at least in some matters) comes only from the consent of the governed, weighed heavily in the writing of the American Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the drafting of the U. S. Constitution in 1787.

Why did our Founding Fathers establish a republic and not a democracy?

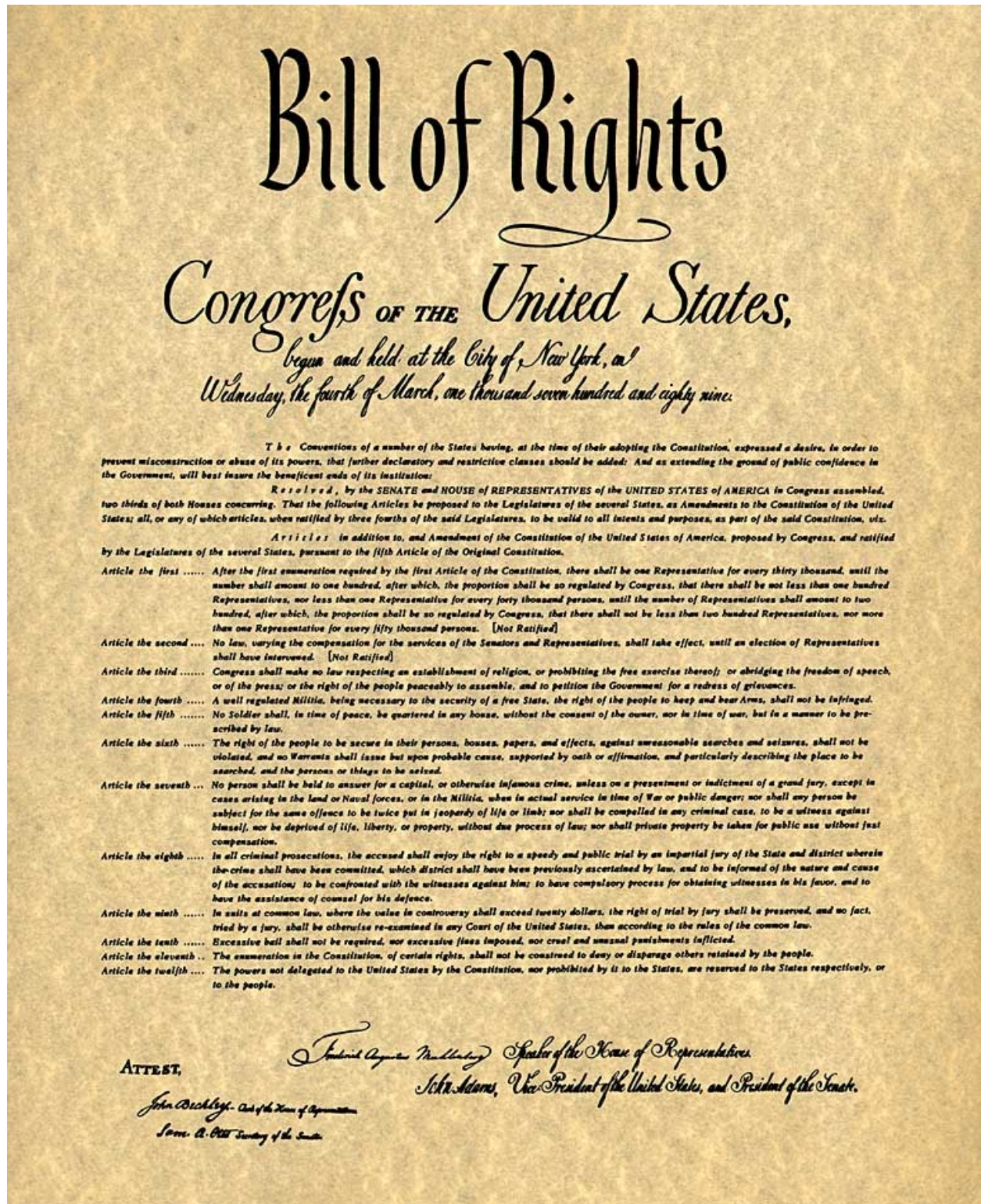
The truth is they disliked, even feared, democracy. In small groups, like your bowling team or VFW lodge, having all the members vote on what time to meet or whether to buy a new T-shirts is a reasonable and fair way to decide. But it is wholly impractical for a multimillion dollar corporation to call a meeting of all its stockholders every time it has to make a decision. That's why corporations have boards of governors whose membership is periodically changed (by popular vote, i.e., by the shareholders). Imagine what it would be like to bring every piece of legislation before millions, tens of millions or hundreds of millions of people.

The most feared aspect of democracy for the Founding Fathers, however, was that it smacks of mob rule. It was the emotional impulsiveness of the Athenians that condemned Socrates to death for corrupting youth by asking too many questions. Had the populace weighed the situation longer, they probably would not have imposed a death sentence. What other insightful questions might the great philosopher have asked had he been allowed to live out his last few years?

The Founding Fathers hoped to avoid lawmaking recklessness not only by vesting legislative power in a Congress, but by dividing that power between two houses, only one of which was elected by the people. More about that later.

The brilliance in the creation of the American Constitutional Republic—one is inclined to call it inspired—can hardly be exaggerated. Governmental powers are divided among three branches of government, thereby providing a safeguard against an abuse of power through a carefully crafted system of checks and balances. Other than the first ten amendments which make up the Bill of Rights, it has been amended only seventeen times in its 200+ years. Two of those amendments (the 18th and 21st) regarding Prohibition cancel each other out, leaving fifteen. There are two others that should be rescinded. The 16th establishes the Income Tax and the Internal Revenue Service, a truly tyrannical agency. There are better, more equitable ways of collecting taxes, e.g., the Flat Tax and the Fair Tax, which does not need an IRS. But that's a subject for a future article. The 17th Amendment provides for the popular election of senators. Returning senatorial appointments to state legislatures, as was the case until 1912, would go a long way toward reestablishing and strengthening state sovereignty, providing accountability and breaking one of the strangleholds incumbents have on federal offices. It would also help limit the creeping

dictatorship of the federal government.



To those who don't believe in American Exceptionalism, I recommend they reconsider. An examination of history will show that liberty, the right to think, say and live the way you want

has never been experienced by mankind to the extent it exists in this country. Other nations have experimented with liberty, for example, the French, but they inevitably ended in reigns of terror. One reason is that they lacked our work ethic, our focus and self-discipline, but also because they failed to distinguish between liberty and license, between freedom and chaos. Another is that their revolutionary constitutions have not incorporated an effective balance of powers to prevent one branch of government from dominating the others. We run into that periodically, too, but it lasts only until one of the other branches exerts its power to curb it. An “imperial president” is checked by the fiscal power of the House or the “advise and consent” authority of the Senate. Currently a growing issue is judicial activism, the assumption by federal judges of executive and legislative powers. It will end soon, probably when the executive questions (and perhaps defies) judicial overreach.

Let us not forget why our ancestors came to this country. It was to enjoy religious freedom. Not freedom from religion but freedom to practice the religion of their choice, rather than one imposed by a king or ecclesiastical authority. Regardless of the church or sect they were members of, regardless of whether they prayed in English, French, German, Latin or Hebrew, they all agreed on a fundamental moral code called the Ten Commandments. They firmly believed, implicitly if not explicitly, that it is wrong to lie, cheat or steal; wrong to covet their neighbor’s goods or spouse; wrong to give one’s word and not keep it.



John Adams said: “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”

Benjamin Franklin added: “Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom. As nations become corrupt and vicious, they have more need of masters.”

The Founding Fathers gave us the means of freedom. It is up to us to keep it, one generation at a time.

Ken Casper was born and raised in New York City. He joined the Air Force, served in Japan, Vietnam, and Germany as well as various stateside assignments before retiring in San Angelo, Texas. An active member and past-president of the San Angelo TEA Party, Ken is also the author of more than twenty-five novels.