



Written by [Wallis W. Wood](#) on June 22, 2010

Benjamin Franklin Had It Right

At first I couldn't believe my eyes. In fact, I had to look away and blink a couple of times before reading the email again. But it still said the same thing: "Benjamin Franklin said, 'We have given you a democratic-republic ... if you can keep it.'"

No, he didn't!

Granted, most Americans probably believe that the United States is a "democracy" because that's what they've heard all their lives. But I was stunned that a regular reader of this column would get Franklin's quote so wrong. Franklin had used the word "republic" without coupling it to the word "democratic," and the difference between a republic (a government of law) and a democracy (majority rule) is so incredibly important to preserving what liberties we have left that I hope you'll indulge me in a brief history lesson.



If you remember much from your high school history classes about the founding of this country, you know there was a great deal of controversy about what type of government the newly independent states should create.

The first effort, the Articles of Confederation, was generally regarded as a failure. But what should replace them? Each state sent a group of representatives to meet in Philadelphia and hammer out a new agreement. The deliberations of the Constitutional Convention in 1787 were held in strict secrecy. Consequently, anxious citizens gathered outside Independence Hall when the proceedings ended, eager to learn what had been produced behind those closed doors.

As the delegates left the building, a Mrs. Powel of Philadelphia asked Benjamin Franklin, "Well, Doctor, what have we got?"

With no hesitation, Franklin replied, "A republic, if you can keep it." Not a democracy, not a democratic republic. But "a republic, if you can keep it."

Over the past four decades I have recounted this story several hundred times. For many years I traveled the country giving speeches about the threats to this Republic. I always enjoyed the opportunity to talk to high school students when I could wrangle an invitation. When I did, I loved to tell them about the differences between a republic and a democracy.

"A lynch mob is democracy in action," I would say. "While if you believe someone is innocent until proven guilty, that they deserve their day in court and that a jury of their peers should decide their fate, then you believe in a nation of laws, not just the whims of a mob."



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Another line I used a lot was, “Democracy is five wolves and a sheep voting on what to have for lunch. If you were the sheep, which would you rather live in — a republic or a democracy?”

I told them about the importance of “binding men down with the chains of a Constitution.” That this was the only sure way to protect their freedom. And that anyone who wanted to change this republic into a democracy was an enemy of liberty.

A century or two earlier there would have been no need to give such a talk — and no interest if one did. Back in the 18th and 19th centuries, every American who could read and write (and probably most of those who couldn’t), knew we were a republic. The campaign to brainwash us into believing we were a democracy didn’t begin until 100 years ago. Today, if you take a poll of high school or college students, the overwhelming majority will tell you that we are a democracy.

Please don’t dismiss this as a mere quarrel over semantics. Understanding the difference between the two systems of government is absolutely vital. I am not exaggerating when I tell you that our very liberties depend on getting more Americans to realize the importance of this seemingly arcane dispute.

Our Founding Fathers Feared And Hated Democracy?

Most high school students who heard me say such a thing were surprised and shocked. They had been taught that the United States was, and had always been, a democracy. That “majority rule” was the fairest of all possible forms of government. Who was this guy to tell them they’d been lied to?

So I quoted what some of our founding fathers had to say. I asked if they had heard of *The Federalist Papers* — the collection of articles written during the debate over ratifying the new constitution.

In *The Federalist*, No. 10, James Madison, often referred to as “the father of the Constitution,” had this to say:

... 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.

Alexander Hamilton concurred. In a speech he gave in June 1788, urging ratification of the Constitution, he thundered:

The ancient democracies in which the people themselves deliberated never possessed one good feature of government. Their very character was tyranny; their figure deformity.

Fisher Ames, a member of Congress during the eight years that George Washington was president, wrote an essay called “the Mire of Democracy.” In it, he said that the framers of the Constitution “intended our government should be a republic, which differs more widely from a democracy than a democracy from despotism.”

Yes, our founding fathers were well aware of the differences between a republic and a democracy. They revered the former; but as I said above, they hated and feared the latter.

In view of the founders’ ardent convictions, it is no surprise that you cannot find the word “democracy” anywhere in the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution of the U.S. Indeed, the Constitution not only proclaimed that our Federal government should be a republic; it went further and mandated that “The United States shall guarantee to every State in this Union a republican form of government.”

These principles used to be widely understood and commonly accepted. John Marshall, chief justice of the Supreme Court from 1801 until 1835, said that, “Between a balanced republic and a democracy, the



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difference is like that between order and chaos.” Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that “democracy becomes a government of bullies tempered by editors.”

Nor was it only Americans who feared and despised democracy. Lord Acton, the famous Englishman who coined the aphorism that “power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely,” had this to say:

“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.”

It was only during the last century that the falsehood about this country being a democracy became widely accepted. Woodrow Wilson declared that we fought World War I “to make the world safe for democracy.” Franklin Roosevelt said that the U.S. “must be the great arsenal of democracy.”

So today, almost every schoolchild in America believes that the U.S. is a democracy. Why did the liberal intelligentsia in this country, supported by their slavish followers in the media and their docile puppets in politics, pull this “bait and switch” on us?

For the answer, let’s turn to another Englishman, Alexander Fraser Tytler, also known as Lord Woodhouselee, who wrote:

A democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only exist until the voters discover 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.

The only part of Mr. Tytler’s warning I’ll dispute is his use of the word “always.” You and I have been given the power to prevent our country’s descent into a democracy. It’s called the ballot box. Let’s hope enough of us use it this coming Nov. 2 to begin the process of taking our country back.

Until next time, keep some powder dry.

Chip Wood was the first news editor of *The Review of the News* and also wrote for *American Opinion*, our two predecessor publications. He is now the geopolitical editor of *Personal Liberty Digest*, where his *Straight Talk* column appears twice a month. This article first appeared in [PersonalLiberty.com](#) and has been reprinted with permission.



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