

Republicanism and American Exceptionalism



“Religion and virtue are the only foundations, not only of republicanism and of all free government.”

— John Adams (1797-1801) Second President of the United States and Patriot

Republicanism is more than a form of government, such as our Constitutional Republic. It is a Judio-Christian biblically based political philosophy, based on republican principles, comprised of republican values and virtues (not the Republican Party). The foundation or bedrock of republicanism is God, His law and blessings upon a people and a nation. Republicanism is spiritual as well and resides in the heart. “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom [liberty].” — 2 Corinthians 3:17 RSV The spirit of republicanism is the Holy Spirit that resides in the hearts of a people and a country who honor God and His law. As Judge Learned Hand reminded us, “Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it.”

The foundation and soul of republicanism is the Bible. John Adams said that “Religion and virtue are the only foundations, not only of republicanism and of all free government.” Dr. Benjamin Rush, considered the father of public schools warned, “If they proceed in it (removing the Bible from schools), they will do more in half a century in extirpating our religion than Bolingbroke or Voltaire could have effected in a thousand years. ...I lament that we waste so much time and money in punishing crimes and take so little pains to prevent them. We profess to be republicans, and yet we neglect the only means of establishing and perpetuating our republican forms of government; that is, the universal education of our youth in the principles of Christianity by means of the Bible; for this divine book, above all others, favors that equality among mankind, that respect for just laws, and all those sober and frugal virtues which constitute the soul of republicanism.” “Before any man can be considered as a member of civilized society” James Madison reminded us, “he must first be considered as a subject of the Governor of the universe” or the laws of God.

The republican values that support republicanism are values such as limited government defined by the Constitution, frugality, personal responsibility and free market which Jefferson, Madison and others called economy. American’s republican values are Biblical, values such as respect for just laws

(laws that do not violate the laws of God or as the Declaration of Independence is founded, “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God”), respect for mans rights given by God not man or government, that all men are equal in God’s eye (equal rights), equal application of the law, biblical basis of law, biblical basis of government and that liberty and freedom are gifts from God not man.

These republican values were committed to parchment with the Declaration of Independence and sealed in the blood with the Revolutionary War. The Declaration of Independence (America’s mission statement) summarizes these republican values, “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it.”

Under these republican values, it is understood that there is a sovereign God that governs the affairs of man. It is understood that man (citizens) and country are dependent on God and have an obligation to God for the many blessings and protection. These values are reflected in the closing petition to God for assistance in the Declaration, “And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

After the Constitution was ratified, republican values could be summarized as fear of God, love of country, patriotism and respect for the sanctity of the Constitution. It was self-evident at the time that the Constitution was an incorporation of the Declaration of Independence into a frame of government or as John Quincy Adams said “the principles of the Declaration of Independence, practically interwoven in the Constitution of the United States.”

The republican virtues that support republicanism are the most important. Because “Neither the wisest constitution nor the wisest laws will secure the liberty and happiness of a people whose manners are universally corrupt.” Samuel Adams said, “He therefore is the truest friend to the liberty of his country who tries most to promote its virtue, and who, so far as his power and influence extend, will not suffer a man to be chosen into any office of power and trust who is not a wise and virtuous man. We must not conclude merely upon a man’s haranguing upon liberty, and using the charming sound, that he is fit to be trusted with the liberties of his country.”

These important republican virtues are virtues such as honesty, sincerity, integrity, responsibility, Industry, temperance, cleanliness, tranquility, silence, order, justice, moderation, chastity, economy, frugality, character, selflessness, humility, respectful, hard work, perseverance, self sacrifice for the greater good and respect for God and His higher law (above laws of man). The reason to encourage republican virtue is liberty. John Witherspoon stated, “The Glory of God, the public interest of religion and the good of others, civil liberty cannot be long preserved without virtue. [A Republic] must either preserve its virtue or lose its liberty.” “Virtue, morality, and religion. This is the armor, my friend,” Patrick Henry exclaimed, “and this alone that renders us invincible. These are the tactics we should study. If we lose these, we are conquered, fallen indeed ... so long as our manners and principles remain sound, there is no danger.”

The basis of republican virtues is the Christian religion. “Citizens should early understand that the genuine source of correct republican principles is the Bible, particularly the New Testament, or the Christian religion.” Noah Webster told us, “All the miseries and evils which men suffer from vice, crime, ambition, injustice, oppression, slavery, and war proceed from their despising or neglecting the

precepts contained in the Bible.”

“Republicanism is not the phantom of a deluded imagination,” George Washington reminded us, “On the contrary, laws, under no form of government, are better supported, liberty and property better secured, or happiness more effectually dispensed to mankind.” Not only did Founding Fathers encouraged republican virtues and values, but felt it was the duty of government to encourage them as well. They even mandated by law under the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 that all new states entering the union, through the means of education, teach and encourage republican virtues and values. Article 3: states, “Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”

The country’s republicanism was noted and written about by Alexis de Tocqueville in his book *Democracy in America* (1835). Tocqueville and friend Gustave de Beaumont left France in 1831 bound for the United States to study the country’s prison system. They arrived in Rhode Island and for 18 months traveled from Boston, New York, Philadelphia to as far away as the Ohio-Michigan wilderness down to New Orleans to Washington D.C. “The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one” he wrote. Alexis de Tocqueville’s observation on the country’s republicanism or the term credited to him, “American Exceptionalism” he described in his book *Democracy in America*. Below is a brief excerpt:

“The Americans combine the notions of Christianity and of liberty so intimately in their minds, that it is impossible to make them conceive the one without the other.” “In France I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom marching in opposite directions. But in America I found they were intimately united and that they reigned in common over the same country.” “I sought for the key to the greatness and genius of America in her harbors...; in her fertile fields and boundless forests; in her rich mines and vast world commerce; in her public school system and institutions of learning. I sought for it in her democratic Congress and in her matchless Constitution. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. Americas is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great”

What Alexis de Tocqueville came to understand that made the United States different or exceptional was republicanism or Christianity and the Bible. He also noted that the spirit of religion and spirit of freedom marched in the same direction or in other words the people and country in spirit, in words and in deeds were honoring God and following the Word and Law.

In closing, would like to I submit excerpts from two letters written shortly before the Revolution War by John Dickinson titled, “A Farmer” (1768), and “A Duty to Posterity” (1774), to further illustrate the principles of republicanism. Dickinson’s letters not only encapsulates the principles republicanism, but they capture the spirit and soul of republicanism, which in turn has made America exceptional among other nations.

Letters from “A Farmer”

“A people is traveling fast to destruction, when individuals consider their interests as distinct from those of the public. Such notions are fatal to their country, and to themselves. Yet how many are there, so weak and sordid as to think they perform all the offices of life, if they earnestly endeavour to increase their own wealth, power, and credit, without the least regard

for the society, under the protection of which they live; who, if they can make an immediate profit to themselves, by lending their assistance to those, whose projects plainly tend to the injury of their country, rejoice in their dexterity, and believe themselves entitled to the character of able politicians. Miserable men! of whom it is hard to say, whether they ought to be most the objects of pity or contempt: but whose opinions are certainly as detestable, as their practices are destructive....

Let us consider our selves as men—freemen—Christian freemen—(following the word of God and Republican virtues and principles) separated from the rest of the world, and firmly bound together by the same rights, interests and dangers. ... for posterity, to whom, by the most sacred obligations, we are bound to deliver down the invaluable inheritance (of liberty and freedom); ...

You may surely, without presumption, believe, that Almighty God himself will look down upon your righteous contest with gracious approbation. You will be a “band of brothers,” cemented by the dearest ties, and strengthened with inconceivable supplies of force and constancy, by that sympathetic ardor, which animates good men [& women], confederated in a good (holy) cause. Your honor and welfare will be, as they now are, most intimately concerned; and besides, you are assigned by divine providence, in the appointed order of things, the protectors of unborn ages, whose fate depends upon your virtue. Whether they shall arise the generous and indisputable heirs of the noblest patrimonies, or the dastardly and hereditary drudges of imperious task-masters, you (with God’s assistance) must determine....

For my part, I am resolved to contend for the liberty delivered down to me by my ancestors; but whether I shall do it effectually or not, depends on you, my countrymen. How little soever one is able to write, yet when the liberties of one’s country are threatened, it is still more difficult to be silent.”

“A Duty to Posterity”

“Honor, justice and humanity call upon us to hold and to transmit to our posterity, that liberty, which we received from our ancestors. It is not our duty to leave wealth to our children; but it is our duty to leave liberty to them. No infamy, iniquity, or cruelty can exceed our own if we, born and educated in a country of freedom, entitled to its blessings and knowing their value, pusillanimously [want of courage] deserting the post assigned us by Divine Providence, surrender succeeding generations to a condition of wretchedness from which no human efforts, in all probability, will be sufficient to extricate them; the experience of all states mournfully demonstrating to us that when arbitrary power has been established over them, even the wisest and bravest nations that ever flourished have, in a few years, degenerated into abject and wretched vassals.”

The End

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