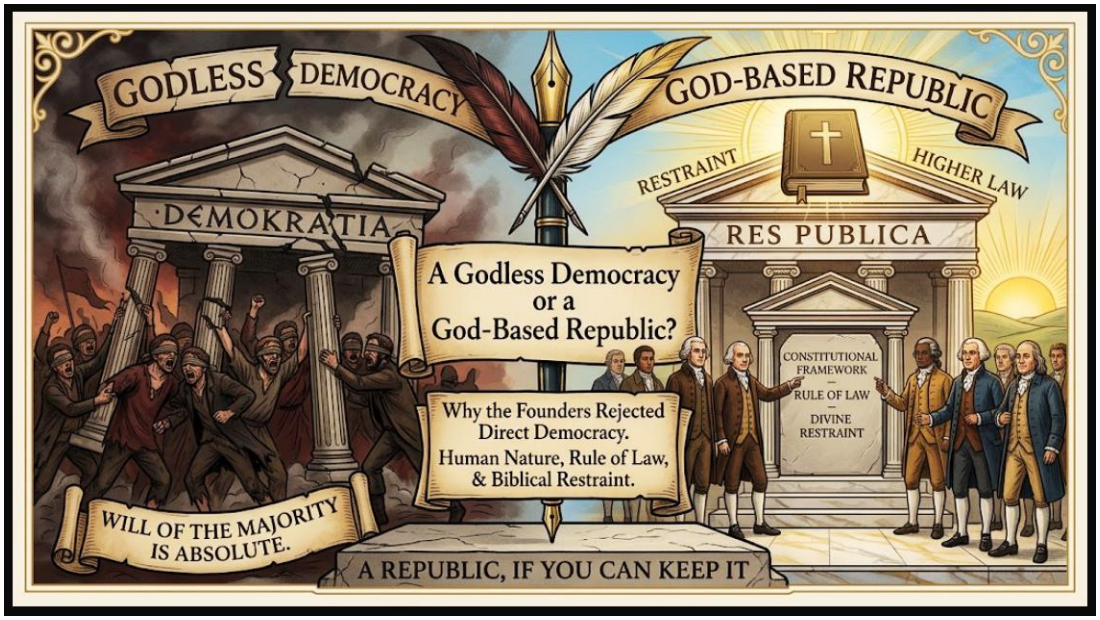

A Godless Democracy or a God-Based Republic?

By
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On September 17, 1787, the final day of the Constitutional Convention, Benjamin Franklin left Independence Hall in Philadelphia. As recorded in the notes of delegate James McHenry, when Franklin departed, he was approached by a woman named Mrs. Elizabeth Powel who asked him directly, "Well, Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?" Franklin immediately and famously replied, "A republic, if you can keep it."

A republic. Not a democracy.

But what distinguishes a republic from a democracy? While both ground their legitimacy in the people, they differ fundamentally in how power is exercised and constrained. The distinction lies in their classical foundations. *Democracy*—from the Greek *demokratia* ('people power')—defines a system of direct popular rule, where decisions are driven by simple majority vote. *Republic*—from the Latin *res publica* ('public affair')—defines a state governed by public law rather than private whim or raw authority.

In a pure democracy, the will of the majority is absolute, leaving minority interests vulnerable to factional rule. A republic, by contrast, relies on chosen representatives operating within a constitutional framework. By placing rule of law above majority preference, a constitutional republic balances popular sovereignty with institutional protections for minority rights. Consider, for example, two wolves and a lamb voting on what to have for supper. In a pure democracy the

lamb might not be too thrilled about the menu but would have no protection from the majority vote. In a republic the lamb could object, pointing out that their constitution bans lamb from the menu.

Alexander Hamilton anticipated Franklin's sentiment when he said during a speech at the Constitutional Convention in June of 1787:

> *We are now forming a republican government. Real liberty is neither found in despotism nor the extremes of democracy, but in moderate governments*.

John Adams, though not present at the Constitutional Convention because he was serving as America's first Minister (Ambassador) to Great Britain, also influenced the Framers through his 1776 essay, *Thoughts on Government*:

> *...[T]here is no good government but what is Republican. ...the very definition of a Republic, is "an Empire of Laws, and not of men." That, as a Republic is the best of governments, so that particular arrangement of the powers of society, or in other words that form of government, which is best contrived to secure an impartial and exact execution of the laws, is the best of Republics.*

Reflecting these ideas, the Framers structured the U.S. Constitution to guarantee a republican—rather than a direct democratic—form of government. This commitment is anchored in the Guarantee Clause of Article IV, Section 4:

> *The United States shall guarantee to every State in this Union a Republican Form of Government, and shall protect each of them against Invasion; and on Application of the Legislature, or of the Executive (when the Legislature cannot be convened) against domestic Violence.*

It is also reinforced throughout the text by separating powers into three distinct branches, requiring supermajorities to amend it, and embedding individual rights within the Bill of Rights.

Why were the Founders so intent on restraining pure democracy? Beyond practical concerns regarding geographic scale (as Madison noted in *Federalist 14*), they harbored a deep skepticism of human nature. In *Federalist 51*, Madison famously observed that if men were angels, no government would be necessary. This constitutional design aligns directly with the Biblical view of man's fallen nature expressed in Jeremiah 17:9:

> *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?*

Because human majorities are subject to self-interest and moral failing, an unconstrained democracy carries the seeds of its own destruction. A constitutional republic, by contrast, establishes a standard of law higher than the fleeting whims of any majority. This idea is reflected by John Witherspoon during his lectures to Princeton undergraduates in the 1770s when he warned against direct democracy in Lecture X: Of Politics:

> *Pure democracy cannot subsist long nor be carried far into the departments of state, it is very subject to caprice and the madness of popular rage. They are also in general slow, and subject to factions*.

Adams also warned of the dangers of a democracy in "An Essay on Man's Lust for Power, with the Author's Comment in 1807" when he observed:

> *[D]emocracy will soon degenerate into an anarchy; such an anarchy that every man will do what is right in his own eyes and no man's life or property or reputation or liberty will be secure, and every one of these will soon mold itself into a system of subordination of all the moral virtues and intellectual abilities, all the powers of wealth, beauty, wit, and science, to the wanton pleasures, the capricious will, and the execrable [abominable] cruelty of one or a very few*.

Believing that man has a fallen sin nature, they realized that something is needed to restrain his penchant for sin. As Alexander Hamilton argued in *Federalist 15*:

> *Why has government been instituted at all? Because the passions of men will not conform to the dictates of reason and justice without constraint*.

Man's inherent sin nature, then, sets the stage for the failure of a democracy. Or, as Jesus says in Mark 7:21-23:

> *[21]For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, [22]Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: [23]All these evil things come from within, and defile the man*.

Consequently, democracies carry the seeds of their own destruction in the hearts of the very majorities that make the decisions. Republics, on the other hand, provide safeguards in the form of a constitution or compact that sets forth a body of laws and rights which restrains the natural tendencies of man's sin nature. This understanding led WallBuilders to observe in their 2023 article, *Republic v. Democracy* (https://wallbuilders.com/resource/republic-v-democracy/#_edn20):

> *The transcendent values of Biblical natural law were the foundation of the American republic. Consider the stability this provides: in our republic, murder will always be a crime, for it is always a crime according to the Word of God. [H]owever, in a democracy, if [a] majority of the people decide that murder is no longer a crime, murder will no longer be a crime*.

Understanding this leads us to the reason why a republic is superior to a democracy. In a republic, government acts as a restraint on the baser nature of man. The majority cannot abuse and take advantage of the minority with a simple majority vote. Instead, there is a reminder that everyone is

both accountable and protected by something greater than the fleeting whims and moods of the majority. In other words, everyone in a republic is held to a standard greater than themselves.

That reflects a profound Biblical truth: each of us is accountable to a standard greater than ourselves: God's Law. This knowledge allowed the Jews when they left Egypt to go from oppressed servitude to a self-governing theocracy under God with the Ten Commandments as their Compact and the Mosaic Law as their body of laws. Believing that "The eyes of the LORD are in every place, beholding the evil and the good" (Proverbs 15:3), they understood that all that they did, public or private, was known by God. They also understood that they would be accountable to God as well:

> *Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment. (Ecclesiastes 11:9)*

> *For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil. (Ecclesiastes 12:14)*

The Apostle Paul reflects this same understanding in Romans 14:7-8 and 12:

> *[7]For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. [8]For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's. ... [12]So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.*

The Framers of the Constitution, with their Biblical worldview, understood these principles as well. They knew that the dangers of a democracy where the will of the majority was sacrosanct would destroy this country because man would ultimately look to himself rather than God as the supreme arbitrator of truth and authority. This reflects the foolishness of man left to himself because, as the Psalmist observed:

> *The LORD knoweth the thoughts of man, that they are vanity. (Psalm 94:11)*

Instead, operating with a Biblical worldview and daily prayer, they gave us a republic with a constitution based on Godly principles, with checks and balances, separating the executive, legislative, and judicial powers into separate branches, and recognizing that everyone, whether in the majority or the minority, had certain unalienable rights. These rights, as previously put forth in the Declaration of Independence, were, as they said, "endowed by [our] Creator," meaning neither granted nor maintained by the will of the majority but by God Himself. Furthermore, they also realized that no matter how well the Constitution was written, it would not suffice to govern a godless nation. As John Adams said in his address to the Massachusetts Militia on October 11, 1798:

> *Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.*

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