

The Health of a Republic

Contributed by Wes Riddle
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The term republic had a significant meaning for all early Americans. The form of government secured by the Declaration of Independence, the American Revolution, and the Constitution was unique, requiring strict limitation of government power. Powers that were permitted would be precisely defined and delegated by the people, with all public officials being bound by their oath of office to uphold the Constitution.

The Constitution made it clear that the government was not to interfere with productive nonviolent human energy. This is the key element that has permitted America's great achievements and made America the political and economic envy of the world. We have truly been blessed.

Today, however, the nature of a republic and the current status of our own form of government are of little concern to most Americans. But there is a small minority, ignored by politicians, academics, and the media, who do spend time thinking about the importance of the proper role of government. The comparison of today's government with the one established by our Constitution is a matter worthy of deep discussion for those who concern themselves with the future and look beyond the coming election. Understanding the principles that were used to establish our nation is crucial to its preservation and something we cannot neglect.

In our early history it was understood that a free society embraced both personal civil liberties and economic freedom. During the 20th century, this unified concept of freedom was undermined. Today we have one group talking about economic freedom, while interfering with our personal liberty, and the other group condemning economic liberty, while preaching the need to protect civil liberties. Both groups reject liberty fifty percent of the time. Sadly, there are very few in this country who, today understand and defend liberty in both areas.

Many Americans wonder why Congress pays little attention to the Constitution and are bewildered as to how so much inappropriate legislation gets passed. But the Constitution is not entirely ignored. It is used correctly at times when it's convenient and satisfies a particular goal, but never consistently across the board on all legislation. The Constitution is all too frequently made to say exactly what the authors of special legislation want it to say. That's the modern way: language can be made relative to our times. But without a precise understanding and respect for the supreme law of the land, the Constitution no longer serves as the guide for the rule of law. In its place come the rule of man and special interests.

That's how we have arrived in the 21st century without a clear understanding or belief in the cardinal principles of the Constitution—the separation of powers and the tenets of federalism. Instead, we are rushing toward centralized control. Executive Orders, agency regulations, federal court rulings, and un-ratified international agreements direct our government, economy, and foreign policy.

Congress has truly been reduced in status and importance over the past hundred years. And when the people's voices are heard, it's done indirectly through polling, allowing our leaders to decide how far they can go without stirring up their constituents. This is opposite to what the Constitution was supposed to do: protect the rights of the minority from the abuses of the majority. The majority vote of the powerful and the influential was never meant to rule the people.

In a free society individuals should control their own lives, receiving the benefits and suffering the consequences of their actions. Once the individual becomes a pawn of the state, whether a monarch or a majority that's in charge, a free society can no longer endure. We are dangerously close to that happening in America, even in the midst of plenty and with the appearance of contentment. If individual freedom is carelessly snuffed out, the creative energy needed for productive pursuits will dissipate. Government produces nothing, and in its effort to redistribute wealth, can only destroy it. Freedom too often is rejected when there is a belief that government largesse will last forever. This is true because it is tough to accept personal responsibility, practice the work ethic, and follow the rules of peaceful coexistence with our fellow man. The temptation is great to accept the notion that everyone can be a beneficiary of the caring state and a winner of the lottery or a class action lawsuit. But history has proven there is never a shortage of authoritarians—benevolent, of course—quite willing to tell others how to live for their own good.

Some of my good friends suggest that it is a waste of time and effort to try to change the direction in which we are going. No one will listen, they argue, and the development of a strong centralized authoritarian government is too far along to reverse the trends of the last century. Why waste time in Congress when so few people care about liberty? The masses, they point out, are interested only in being taken care of, and the elites want to keep receiving the benefits allotted to them through special-interest legislation.

I am not naïve enough to believe the effort to preserve liberty is a cakewalk. But ideas, based on sound and moral principles, do have consequences. Our Founders clearly understood this, knowing they would be successful, even against overwhelming odds. They described this steady confidence, which they shared with each other when hopes were dim, as "divine providence." We face tough odds, but to avoid battle or believe there is a place to escape to someplace else in the world would concede victory to those who endorse authoritarian government. The grand experiment in human liberty must not be abandoned. A renewed hope and understanding of liberty are what we need today.

Wesley Allen Riddle is a retired military officer with degrees and honors from West Point and Oxford. Widely published in the academic and opinion press, he serves as State Director of the Republican Freedom Coalition (RFC) and is currently running for U.S. Congress (TX-District 25) in the Republican Primary. He is also author of two books, *Horse Sense for the New Millennium* (2011), and *The Nexus of Faith and Freedom* (2012). Both books are available on-line at

www.WesRiddle.net and from fine bookstores everywhere. Email: Wes@WesRiddle.com.