

The Language of Liberty Series



The U.S. is not a Democracy - So What Is It? Part 1

By Mark Herr, CSG Administrative Staff

During my middle and high school years, I found it strange to say a pledge to the United States flag, “and to the republic for which it stands”, and in the same class, be taught the United States was a democracy. The teacher would correct my inquisitive nature by stating “It’s semantics. Democracy and republic are really the same thing. The United States is a democratic republic.” Not satisfied with that justification of semantics and nuance, I continued to explore and discover the difference between U.S. republic and democracy, and I’m still exploring it today. Let’s explore and discover together!

Where did the ideas come from which provided the Framers with the foundations for America’s unique republican form of government?

In his book *Republic (Greek: Politeia)*, Plato argues the definition of justice and the role of the city and the individual in discovering the definition of justice (Book I & II). He defends educating the ‘Guardians’ of a just city (the collective) at an early age (Book III & IV). And, in his ‘just city’, no distinction exists between man or woman, families, marriage, private property and he proclaims the best form of government consists of philosopher kings (i.e. truth seekers, incorruptible, just men, etc.) who are the best rulers for this “good city” (Book VI-X).

Cicero, in his work *Of Republic (Latin: De Re Publica)*, defined republic as ‘property of the public’ (Book 1: 39). He surmised that the ideal form of government was to mix monarchy, aristocracy and democracy together (Book 1: 53). In Cicero’s view, leadership of this ‘ideal’ form of government was best left to nobility (the aristocracy/the Senate) to govern the perfect republic.

John Adams, in his 1786 effort [*A Defence \[sic\] of the Constitutions of Government of the United States*](#), explores republican forms of government throughout world history. During the 1787 U.S. Constitutional convention, his work heavily influenced the delegates’ consideration of different forms of government.

In modern times, republic may be defined by SIRI and Google on your Smartphone as a ‘representative democracy’.

During the Center for Self Governance Level 1 in-class exercises, trainees give several of their own definitions for republic. They may say, republic means ‘rule of law’ or ‘rule by elected representatives’. Some students say it means ‘rule by the people’ or ‘rule by all’. Ironically, by the end of Level 1 they often ask “Have we (the U.S. governed) ever functioned as the U.S. republic was designed?”

Given that no single or concisely agreed upon definition for ‘U.S. republic’ exists, it is no less surprising that consolidating the U.S. republic with democracy dominates the modern narrative in schools, the media, political figures, and the U.S. culture at large. The Latin word ‘res publica’, literally means ‘the public thing.’ And in Greek, the word ‘democracy’ is ‘demos kratos’ or ‘people power’. Do the two meanings, ‘of the public’ and ‘people power’, mean the U.S. is supposed to be a democratic-republic fusion?

Let’s consider the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) otherwise known as North Korea. Is it republican in form because it is ‘of the people’? It has a constitution and separate legislative, executive and judicial branches – so does it have checks and balances? The people vote for representation – so is rule by the people a democratic function? The parliament passes laws – so does it have rule by law? It has all the so-called structural elements of ‘republic’. So, if democracy and republic are semantically the same thing, then the United States, being similarly structured, is like the North Korean government, right?

Most Americans would say North Korea is a totalitarian dictatorship, and not a republic, because the people live under the tyranny of their god, the one ‘Dear Leader’ – Kim Jung Un. I wonder, after the recent elections, how many Americans would say the current president is a totalitarian dictator too? It might also be said that North Koreans are oppressed and live in slavery. The irony is that both countries’ constitutions guarantee the right of suffrage, freedom of speech, equality, human rights, private property rights, and so on.

Some may even say the difference between the two so-called ‘democratic republics’ may be the peaceful transfer of control enjoyed during a U.S. presidential election. Considering the recent election, define peaceful transfer. The U.S. is a nation based on the social ideals of its founding leaders (Christianity), while North Korea is a nation based on the social ideals of its founding leaders (Juche). Depending on your perspective and worldview, the origins and outcomes are very different but the governance structure is still fundamentally the same.

So then, what makes the U.S. republican structure with its hint of democracy at election time different from the North Korean democratic republic? Ask yourself; can a North Korean or an American maintain any and every political boundary within their republican structure? And if they tried, what would be the end-result? The North

Korean, if they attempted to maintain or steer the DPRK, would end up either executed or imprisoned. The American could similarly face execution like Lavoy Finicum at the Malheur Refuge, Oregon, or imprisonment like Ammon Bundy in Bunkerville, Nevada.

This is the important difference: The governed (that's us, regardless of voting status) have the right to maintain the political boundaries of our republican structure. Unlike our North Korean counterparts, U.S. citizens (the governed) are free to become the keepers of their government. The American must merely sacrifice their time to *learn the system* and maintain their U.S. republic daily, while periodically using a democratic control (voting). For Americans, learning the system is the key.

Throughout human history, the idea that the governed could maintain, let alone steer, their structure of government in shared cooperation with the governors was laughable, if not contemptible – until the creation of the unique, experimental U.S. republic.

In his first inaugural address, George Washington stated, "...the destiny of the republican model of government...is staked on an experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people"

Is the destiny of North Korea in the hands of the North Korean people? Of course not. But you can take the destiny of the U.S. republic into your hands by learning the system and applying that knowledge. Are you ready to start keeping your republic?

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