



### **The U.S. is Not a Democracy, Part 3**

By Mark Herr, CSG Administrative Staff

A little-known figure, Mrs. Eliza (Elizabeth) Powel, had the historic exchange with Benjamin Franklin when he said to her “Madam, We have given you a republic, if you can keep it” at the conclusion of the 1787 U.S. Constitutional Convention. Keep this in mind: If the U.S. architects had produced a democracy, Eliza, as a woman, wouldn’t have had a voice at all. She could not vote or hold public office, yet she kept her republic. So how did she keep it?

Interestingly, Dr. Franklin did not counsel her how to ‘keep’ the U.S. republic. Instead, he merely counseled her to keep it. She had to figure out how to keep it (or maintain it) on her own. She had to exercise self-governance. Jefferson defined our republic as “a state of society in which every member of mature and sound mind, has an equal right of participation; personally, in the direction of the affairs of the Society.” (Letter to Isaac H. Tiffany, April 4, 1819)

To a person like me who deals in technical details, this would be extremely frustrating. Tell me or show me how to “personally participate in the direction of the affairs of the Society.” This is like telling someone to fix an airplane, mid-flight, without any instruction or on the job training.

Thankfully, Thomas Jefferson explained that “keeping the republic” is a learn-as-you-go experiment in self-governance. He said, “When forced to assume [self-government], we were novices in its science. Its principles and forms had entered little into our former education. We established, however, some, although not all its important principles.” (Thomas Jefferson to John Cartwright, 1824) Is Jefferson insinuating our methods of self-governance are fluid or changing, mid-flight?

Jefferson explained, “Our successors start on our shoulders. They know all that we know, and will add to that stock the discoveries of the next fifty years; and what will be their amount we may estimate from what the last fifty years have added to the science of human concerns.” (letter to Isaac H. Tiffany, April 4, 1819) Does this mean that our maintenance responsibilities are ongoing or never-ending?

The U.S. Architects counted on us, the governed, to overcome the gravity of our human nature and discover the remaining maintenance principles for ourselves.

During the U.S. Constitutional convention, James Madison *originally* wanted a representative democracy through his Virginia Plan. Consider what America would look like if the Framers had given us a representative democracy. Then our only so-called maintenance responsibility would be a periodic vote to replace or keep the governors (or pilots). In the world of maintenance, those are control actions, not maintenance actions.

James Madison changed his thinking after the Constitutional convention. He said, "It is evident that no other form would be reconcilable with the genius of the people of America; with the fundamental principles of the Revolution; or with that honorable determination which animates every votary of freedom, to rest all our political experiments on the capacity of mankind for self-government." (James Madison, Federalist #39, January 16, 1788)

How then, did Mrs. Powel attempt to maintain her republic without her vote?

First, she learned the system of government (like a pilot, flight attendant and maintenance crew would learn the systems of their aircraft). Second, she built relationships with the governors and the governed alike (like flight attendants and passengers will often do). And lastly, she used her relationships and her knowledge of the systems to keep the U.S. republic air-worthy (like a maintenance crew would). As the governed, her chief focus was keeping (or maintaining) her U.S. republic. Her comfort as a "passenger" was secondary.

Mrs. Powel's home was a gathering point for entertainment, dining, and political dialogue prior to, during, and for years after the Constitutional Convention of 1787. While unusual for a woman in those times, Mrs. Powel engaged her guests about the structure of government and articulately offered her insights and opinions about its design. (Letter from Anne Francis to Mary Byrd, March 1808) By the time she met Franklin at the steps of Independence Hall, she knew exactly which systems had been considered when she asked, "Dr. Franklin, what have you given us? A monarchy or a republic?" Without her knowledge of the system, she could not possibly know how to maintain it.

After the convention, she further strengthened and expanded her relationships with the governors and the governed. One such notable relationship was with President George Washington. He and Martha were frequent guests at the Powel home. The Powels and the Washingtons regularly exchanged invitations to tea. The President and Mrs. Powel were often seen walking through the streets of Philadelphia talking politics. Their relationship was close enough that the President confided in Eliza that he was not planning to run for a second term. Her

relationship with the President was one of trust and mutual respect. She had earned the ability to influence his decision.

[Mrs. Powel wrote](#) to President Washington that his leaving office, "wou'd elate the Enemies of good Government . . . The antifederalists would use it as an argument for dissolving the Union, and would urge that you, from Experience, had found the present System a bad one, and had, artfully withdrawn from it that you might not be crushed under its Ruins." Washington took the advice seriously and ultimately agreed to serve a second term in office. (letter to George Washington, November 1792)

Mrs. Powel wrote to him, not because HIS actions would keep the republic, but because those who wished to "lose" the republic would capitalize on the opportunity to "crash the aircraft". He followed her advice although, at that time, she could not hold an office or even vote for him! She strategically changed the destiny of the U.S. republic by "keeping it". She learned the system, she built relationships, and she strategically used her words and actions to "keep her republic" as Ben Franklin advised. Although, not having an instruction manual to guide her, Mrs. Powel added "to that stock the discoveries of the next fifty years; and...to the science of human concerns."

We must do our part to maintain the republic during our lifetimes. It is our responsibility to establish how to "keep it", as Jefferson said, "some, although not all its important principles." Mrs. Powel discovered some of Jefferson's maintenance principles. To continue maintaining the American experiment in self-governance, the rest is up to us!

Next week in Part 4, we will learn the basic elements of our republic.

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