

## A Republic—IF you can keep it!

Assembled by Guy Newland (February 2019, UUFCM, Mount Pleasant MI)

(important to note that several parts of this are taken from the Richard Primus source listed at end)

**1** A woman asked Benjamin Franklin, “Have we got a republic or a monarchy?” He replied, “A republic, *if* you can keep it.”

Four US Presidents were Unitarians—John Adams and John Quincy Adams, also Taft and Filmore. That trails Episcopalians and Presbyterians, but ties the Methodists and Baptists. We beat all other denominations—so yeah, we’ve been overrepresented.

**2** The religious views of Thomas Jefferson were more radical than those of Unitarians *then*, but align well with UU today. John Adams converted to Unitarianism because he rejected the Calvinist doctrines of his youth. So Adams and Jefferson—the two most crucial thinkers in developing our American form of government—are our spiritual family.

**3** Our fifth UU principle is: “The right of conscience and the use of the *democratic process* within our congregations and *in society at large*.” Let’s consider how our “society at large,” our nation, has striven imperfectly to embody democratic ideals. Where would we now stand in Ben Franklin’s eyes as to our success in keeping a republic?

**4** Some see Trump’s presidency as the death knell for American democracy. Others challenge the notion that we have ever truly *had* a democracy, given that the poor, the non-white, the non-rich, and the non-male have been so frequently deprived of full participation as human citizens. At one point, I myself referred to the Bush-Cheney administration as a kleptocracy.

Nevertheless, despite its terrible injustices and very grave imperfections, we have had *for the most part* a republic including certain features: **5**

- Most government authority has been held by officials chosen for fixed terms via what we have taken as fair elections.

- Officeholders *usually* recognize political opponents as legitimate alternatives; they do not use state power to jail, exile, or otherwise persecute political opponents.
- Authority is vested in offices, not persons or parties. So law enforcement is not openly used as a tool for the political or personal agendas. Instead, public officials know that they are expected to pursue the *public* good as they understand it.
- Other features: shared values of free expression, equality before the law, and religious liberty.

These are imperfectly achieved and we disagree on the balance among these values, but there is broad agreement that some list like this, rather than aristocratic bloodlines, is what should matter in the USA. The establishment and promotion of such values is what justified our very existence as a nation.

*Yet* history gives **no** examples of Democratic Republics that have existed continuously since ancient times. They are *all* impermanent.

And also: it gives us no examples of perfect republics. *Grading on a curve*, relative to all the other imperfect forms of government that have existed, the American republic has done pretty well. But from what we are seeing of the Trump administration, our best days (such as they were) may be gone. *Unless* our republic can be strengthened by a backlash against Trump.

May it be so.

But, *How* did we get here? For decades, the Democratic party included both the liberal wing of American politics and the *southern wing*, the upholders of Jim Crow and their political descendants. **6** Republicans and Democrats opposed each other, but united in opposing first Nazis and then Commies. All white politicians assumed that there would be no *fundamental* reform of our racial caste system. **7** The Civil Rights movement helped bring this to an end, after which the Republican party came gradually to dominate the south.

The first federal elections held entirely within this new situation were in 1994, producing Republican majorities in Congress and a Democrat in the White House. **8** Led by Newt Gingrich, the Republicans began a series of government shutdowns featuring rhetoric portraying the “Democrat party”

as a threat to the Constitution rather than a legitimate alternative. This view becomes institutionalized: the 2012 *and* 2016 Republican party platform-statements identify the GOP as “*the party of the [American] Constitution.*” Any other party is thereby delegitimized as un-American.

At the elite end, Republicans call themselves as “strict constructionists,” the only ones to take the Constitution seriously; they see judges appointed by Democrats as lawless panderers. **9** At the *populist* end, Trump rose to political prominence by promoting the notion that Obama was *constitutionally unfit* to hold office. The Birther-in-chief soon became our President.

When you believe that allowing the other party to legislate will destroy the country, then *any type of obstructionism is justified. And in a sense we can't help ourselves: we mirror that:* those of us who oppose Trump do see HIM as the biggest threat to the country—and very far from being any sort of legitimate alternative.

Think about playground basketball, or playing any kind of game without third-party judges, umpires and referees. Each opponent tries hard to win, but *holds that competition within the framework of greater shared values* such as respect for one another, respect for fairness, and respect for the game itself. All know that without such a framework, and in the absence of an omnipotent umpire/emperor/or god, the game is over. We can't play. And then everyone will say: we really want to play, so we need an omnipotent emperor, pronto.

With Trump as President, the core features of the American Republic no longer hang in the balance; they are crumbling. I have been sickened and horrified over and over again by the outrages this man has inflicted upon vulnerable people. Trying to follow the news responsibly invites compassion fatigue, emotional exhaustion.

Patriotic Republicans like Romney, McCain, and the Bushes saw Trump immediately as a bigot, a conman, and a bully in whom it would be irresponsible to invest the authority of a grade school hall monitor. But the Republican party as a whole has reconciled itself to him as a lesser evil; they have made

themselves complicit by tolerating extraordinary misconduct. Two years of Trump and we are no longer shocked by his latest outrage. Shameless venality is the new normal.

Are American officials chosen through fair elections? **10** This was already debatable on many grounds, including the outcome of the Bush v. Gore case, but Trump has made it clear that any election he doesn't win is unacceptable. If he needs Russian help to make that happen, then he just asks for that, both publicly and privately.

Does Trump recognize political opponents as legitimate alternatives? He absolutely does not; he demanded that Hillary be locked up and incited violence against protesters at his rallies.

Can we at least agree that everyone is under the authority of the law, that law enforcement is not a tool for personal agendas? No. We definitely cannot agree on that. **11** Even *before* Trump, Dick Cheney and his circle concluded that anything the President does is inherently legal by virtue of being a Presidential act. Following through, Trump simply assumes that the FBI and the Justice Department will be working in his personal interests—and goes berserk on Twitter when they aren't.

**12** Trump *openly* uses his office for personal benefit, driving business to his hotels and resorts and negotiating with foreign governments trade concessions for his family's business holdings. He doesn't sneaks around and do this under cover of night, like all the other sleazy politicians in our rich, ongoing history of sleaze and corruption. Trump is different. It is the difference between violating a norm and erasing a norm altogether.

And as for free expression, equality, religious liberty and impartial administration of justice, Trump defines the press as bad people and “the enemy,” **13** he gives comfort to avowed White Supremacists, **14** he puts brown-skinned children in cages, and equates Mexicans to rapists. Multiple courts have found that he promotes discrimination against Muslims as a federal policy. He responds by calling these judges “bad judges” and “Obama judges.” He declares that the exonerated (but Black) Central Park Five should be in prison, while pardoning convicted felons who his allies: Joe Arpaio and Dinesh D'Souza.

I can't find any aspect of what we value in a democratic republic that Trump has not thoroughly trashed.

**15** As UUs, besides democratic process we are also committed (per the fourth principle) to a responsible search for truth. As to seeing this in government, it seems that every US President has lied. But some have lied a lot more often than others, and Trump is the grand champion. The Washington Post calculates that he made false statements 2,140 times in just his first year in office, averaging almost 6 lies per day. But beyond this astonishing tally, what's really astonishing is that Trump is not the least abashed about making false statements. He is shameless.

Our fourth principle (the search for truth) and our fifth (democratic process) *need* each other. Without truth, democracy comes to an end. **16** Hannah Arendt argues:

The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction and the distinction between true and false no longer exist.

The Trump era has brought us the phrases “fake news” (meaning actual facts that you dislike) and “alternative facts” (what you would prefer to have the world believe.)

Like Trump's corruption of democracy via utterly shameless lying has a historical context. The postmodernist argument that all truths are partial (and a function of one's perspective) led to the insight that there are many legitimate ways to represent events. This supported more inclusive conversations and made it possible for the disfranchised to be heard.

But: it has also been exploited by those who want to push offensive or debunked claims. Creationists called for teaching “intelligent design” alongside evolution in schools. Don't teach just one (albeit scientific) point of view. “Teach the controversy.” True, some say climate change is a catastrophic problem caused by humans, but that is just their point of view. Others say it isn't happening at all or is mostly caused by trees and volcanoes or it is a really good thing. Once the public becomes familiar with

this set of moves, Trump can claim that his inauguration was the best-attended in history and that there was no collusion and even if there was collusion, that was fine. After all, everyone is entitled to their point of view. And, it would seem, to what they would prefer to treat as facts.

We have seen some backlash, some pushback, against the corrosion of truth and democratic institutions, but nations often cross gradually into autocracy; a great percentage of dictators were initially elected. Are we on that path? Freedom House, an international evaluator of the health of democracies, reports two consecutive years of significant decline in our ranking. We are now far behind France, Germany, the UK, Scandinavia and Canada, and have fallen a bit behind countries like Greece, Mauritius, and Latvia. Freedom House now classes the USA with *struggling democracies* such as Croatia and Mongolia. These are places that are still free, but are becoming less so.

Here in this room, we have highly diverse beliefs, but we're committed to working together, to supporting one another. All Americans need likewise to renew our commitment to work and live together. George Washington reminded citizens of their "common concerns" and the "common cause" they fought for in the revolution. Jefferson called for the young country to unite "in common efforts for the common good". They said these things precisely because they presided over a *tenuous* union of diverse ex-colonies; and they sought to form a more perfect union.

A sense of common purpose and a shared sense of reality bind together diverse peoples. We need a shared story, a narrative framework, a shared understanding of the playground rules within which intense but respectful competition can take place. **17** Fox News and fascist trolls around the world block the construction of such a shared reality. They incite factionalism, exacerbating divisions between people along racial and religious lines.

There are no easy remedies, but here are a few suggestions.

1. It's essential that citizens defy the cynicism and resignation that autocrats depend on to subvert resistance. I can stand to hear only so much Trump news in a certain day, or a certain week, but I know: we will have to be politically active *perhaps as never before*. We will have to fight. **18** As Frederick Douglass said, "Power concedes nothing without a demand . . . If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom yet depreciate agitation are like men who want crops without plowing up the ground."

2. So fight resolutely for our values, but do so without demonizing those who disagree. In my own view, fierce resistance to autocracy is distinct from and in the long run more important than our resistance to particular right-wing policies. Autocracy feeds on polarization. Many people in the USA dislike immigration and want to build a wall; some want much lower taxes on the rich, many want less gun control, some of all races want prayer in school, while others want less welfare and less access to abortion. These people understand themselves to be good people who have conservative and traditional values. They see themselves as patriots, not racists. They see themselves as lovers of freedom.

Can we strongly disagree with them without saying, "they are bad people"? **19** Deeyah Khan, a Muslim woman of color who filmed her conversations with white supremacists, says, "Judging and condemning jihadists and white supremacists *feels great*, but yields little." They *are* people. Frightened people, frustrated people, angry people, seeking-freedom-and-justice-as-they-see-it people. **20** People who have been miseducated and intentionally misled. They are confused because they have been led into confusion. The challenge is that while we believe everything they are saying—and most of what they think about themselves—is *wrong*, we still have to live and work together with them as fellow Americans.

3. Build issue-based coalitions across ideological lines, party lines—and across religious lines, joining anti-racist evangelicals and environmental republicans; this immediately undermines dehumanizing political polarization. And we can work for ICRH, the soup kitchen, work as a hospice volunteer or with the County Commission on Aging. Charity work *doesn't* bring structural change but

besides helping particular people who do need help, it puts us shoulder to shoulder with all sorts of other human helpers, for some of whom Fox News is Gospel.

In every possible way, let's seek to restore and strengthen the framework of common purpose and shared democratic values within which the diverse perspectives of our society can compete both fiercely—while respecting *the intrinsic worth and dignity of even those with whom differ the very most*.

This is very hard, but I am motivated to do it when I reflect that the alternative is the dictatorship that seems already to exist in our President's mind.

## 21

### *Some Sources*

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