



Is America a Republic or a Democracy? Bush Says Latter

By José Stelle

In his 2007 State of the Union Address, referring to the War on Terror, President Bush declared that “we advance our own security interests by helping . . . brave voices for democracy . . . in the Middle East . . .” Thus he reiterated his commitment to “spread democracy around the world.” Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has often spoken in similar terms.¹ In the President’s and the Secretary’s speeches and interviews, “democracy” may appear alongside “free society,” rule of law,” and “human rights.” Mostly, though, the word floats alone like a strident hope, as if it had a clear and special American sound to which a cunning anti-American world is expected to rock.

Until quite recently, Americans thought and spoke of their country as a republic. “Shine, perishing republic,” lamented poet Robinson Jeffers as late as 1925, meaning that a “republic” was like the splendor of life; an “empire,” the rot of decadence.² Even President Kennedy, a Democrat, called on Americans “to assure the survival and the success of liberty,”³ not of democracy. Times have changed. By executive order, as it were, America has finally been declared a democracy. Following the Bush Administration’s rationale, one would think that the main concern of Americans now is not to consolidate the rule of law in their own “perishing republic,” but rather to die on the dunes and headlands of the world — for democracy.

Is there hope of reversing this doubtful condition? For strengthening the mental, moral, and political defenses of the American Republic? Yes — if, for starters, like Aristotle, whose penchant for definitions helped to form the United States,⁴ Americans begin to update their education by thinking about this troubled word: democracy. Is it friend or foe? What is its lineage?

The consequences of unrestrained majority rule (democracy, from the Greek *demos*, people, and *kratos*, power⁵) stand out as one of the classical writers’ main themes. Those men feared democracy as they feared the plague, associating it with mob rule and tyranny. Aristotle, who had a good eye for politics, said, “Democracy is nothing more than the rule of the poor in the state, just as oligarchy is the rule of the rich.”⁶ He found democracy self-contradictory, thus “not a constitution at all.”⁷ He opposed both forms of government with equal force and defended the rule of law, which favors neither. Until Babeuf, an admirer of the French Terror, and then Marx rediscovered democracy’s kinship with communism, it did not much engage the interest of scholars except Tocqueville. More recently, Hayek showed that its current form leads to the gradual transformation of a free society into an authoritarian system ruled by organized interests.⁸

The Founding Fathers were not democrats. Having studied the classical writers, they equated democracy with political disorder. Franklin compared democracy to “two wolves and a lamb voting on what to have for lunch.” Madison often spoke of “popular” or “republican”⁹ government, rarely of democracy. As excessively generous students of Republican Rome, the Framers sought to discipline popular government through a legal structure. Consequently, in spite of such party designations as Democratic-Republicans (1796), William Leggett’s “democratick editorials” (1836), and Walt Whitman’s utterance of “the word democratic” (1855), the idea of democracy remained largely absent from American speech until early 1917. The United States was, after all, a republic; a government of laws, not of men — at least in theory.

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Be that as it may, the elected men were short on the powers and the corrupting budget a democracy must have.

Then in 1917 President Wilson startled the nation with his “war to save the world for democracy.” He was clearly “reaching”; the word stuck in America’s craw and died. During the FDR years the word appeared more frequently than ever before, then took a back seat. It was not until the presidency of George H. Bush (who, like his son, had a faraway war to fight) that the “d” word came forward to stake a more definite claim in the American vocabulary — significantly, alongside the brand-new and equally undefined “new world order.” President Clinton made use of the emerging term and, for good democratic measure, of “new world order.” But he had no great war to fight for democracy, so once more the errant spirit of this word hung in the political air, awaiting transportation. Apparently, it found a suitable vessel in the War on Terror.

Is the President’s use of the “d” word an innocent attempt to curry favor with a skeptical, mostly socialist world by proving that America is good because it supports democracy? Or is it an overt act of political cross-dressing, of intellectual surrender unworthy of America’s heritage and of its sacrifices on the field of battle? Given the historical record of violence, or at best political conflict, associated with democracy, Americans would be within bounds if they judged the word’s new rank as official mantra to result from a deliberate manipulation, something like the choreographed repetition of the word *augustus* (that is, *divine*) by the clique of the scrawny, bow-legged Octavius until the benumbed Romans finally accepted his claim to divinity and power.

Manipulation or not, the President and the Secretary have little idea of how hollow their favorite word rings in a hostile world in which the U.S. is viewed as a vanishing empire and its officers as naïve aliens, when not plain fools. At any rate, it is fitting to recall that Hitler came to office by the vote; that the Chilean communist Allende was also elected democratically by a slim majority, having to be put down two and a half years later at the request of Chile’s Congress; and that a growing, democratically elected group of sophisticated Latin American communist despots conspires, as this is being written, to bring the compact force of an all-socialist Latin America to bear against the southern gates of the U.S. The Administration’s confusion of “democracy” with “republic” and of elections with the rule of law cannot hide that looming fact — or a foreign policy spun of gauze, not of solid cloth. The good people of America deserve a better explanation than the one they have received for why the President chose to sacrifice the nation’s character on the altar of a dubious and uninspiring word historically tainted with strife.

Endnotes:

¹For instance, on June 20, 2005, at the American University in Cairo: “Now [w]e are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people” (<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/48328.htm>).

²*Robinson Jeffers: Selected Poems*, Vintage Press, New York, 1965.

³In his Inaugural Address, January 1961, at a time of great Soviet pressure on the United States.

⁴Mostly through Aristotle’s acknowledged influence on Locke through Aquinas and the scholastics.

⁵*The Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*, McMillan, New York, 1958; as for example in the word *pankratos*, all-power, the extremely violent form of Greek boxing.

⁶See Arthur Rosenberg’s highly praised *Democracy and Socialism*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1965, p. 10. Rosenberg happily stresses Marx’s insight that non-socialist democracy leads to socialism by degrees.

⁷Aristotle, *Politics*, IV, iv, 7, Loeb Classical Library edn., Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1932, p. 304.

⁸Socialists have at times associated this word with their cause, but “democracy” remains their favorite.

⁹See his *The Political order of a Free People*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979. The corruption of liberal constitutionalism by “democracy” led Hayek to create the word “demarchy.”

José Stelle is a former Visiting Scholar with Public Interest Institute, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa.

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