

REPUBLIC or DEMOCRACY?

The greatest legacy left to us by America's founders is ...

by Vic Berecz

We pledge allegiance to this *Republic* ... yes, that is without a doubt what America is. A republic is a state in which the supreme power is vested in the whole voting community, which elects representatives to exercise their power. We call it representative government. Our founding fathers chose representative government over *pure* or *direct* democracy. They knew the drawbacks of direct democracy. They saw it in the day-to-day workings of New England local government ... the *Town Meeting*. We still have them in a few places (I lived in one of those little towns for a few years) and they work no better now than they did then ... few people attend town meetings ... those with the loudest voices still make their presence felt most ... and, lack of communal patience leads to dramatic flights of fancy and untimely policy changes. Just because an up-to-date national version of a *Town Meeting* ... maybe everybody getting on the *Internet* each Monday evening and voting on all kinds of stuff ... is now technically feasible, doesn't mean it'll work any better than the *Town Meetings* of old.

The legacy of representative government is one of the factors that makes America great. But, we're constantly bashing and weakening it ... and I don't mean by broadening the electorate. Here are three issues that have become the whipping-boys of extremists: the Electoral College, Congressional salaries, and representation in the U.S. Senate. Let's talk briefly about each.

I'll start at the top ... the way we elect our President. The *Electoral College* was a carefully drawn compromise at the *Constitutional Convention*. It recognized that we were a diverse nation ... even then ... and that diversity needed to be encouraged and perpetuated. The *Electoral College* ensures that each State gets a significant and visible role in the election of our President. They didn't want Virginia and Pennsylvania to largely control the choice of the President ... now it may be California and Texas, but the same argument holds. The Constitution leaves up to each State how its Electors are permitted to express the will of that State's electorate. Most have chosen an all-or-nothing approach. I think there are better options, but let's leave that up to the States as our founding fathers intended. Certainly to replace the *Electoral College* with a national popularity contest is *not* a better option. We can do better than to use *American Idol* as our national role model!

When the hollering starts, all too often Congressional salaries are the focus. Too much vacation, don't do their jobs, give themselves raises, etc. etc. Bottom-line ... members of Congress are paid about 10% of the *minimum* wage of a professional football player ... they are paid 1% of what is paid to David Letterman, who earns his living making fun of them. The truth is, members of Congress are paid about what a lower-level manager is paid at most U.S. corporations. Actually, it's been like that for quite a while. More than two decades ago, I was sent by my company on a two-year assignment in the Washington, DC area. As a second-level engineering manager, I was making the same pay as Congress was at the time. (Sounds analogous to getting elected to Congress, doesn't it?) My company reimbursed me for the costs of maintaining a second home in the Virginia suburbs, and that was a very substantial amount. (Yes, I paid taxes on every nickel of it!) Without that help, I flat-out would not have been able to afford to take that assignment. Yet, we ask our Congress to do the same without reimbursement, except for a travel allowance. To me, the question isn't "are they paid too much?" ... it's "are

they paid too little?” Unless we want to have only people of independent wealth represent us, let’s just shut-up about congressional salaries.

Almost a hundred years ago we took the election of the US Senators away from the State Legislatures by a Constitutional amendment. Many Americans continue to criticize the Senate as a do-nothing body that is unfairly elected, since little States get the same two Senators as big ones. But, in a Senate made up of 20 Californians, 15-each of Texans, Floridians, and New Yorkers, etc. etc. ... who’s going to speak up for the chicken plucker in Salisbury, Maryland or the coal miner in Magnolia, West Virginia or the ER nurse in Aberdeen, South Dakota or the rancher in Granger, Wyoming or the fisherman in Kodiak, Alaska? The one Senator representing the twenty-five smallest States? Fortunately, largely through the power of tradition and the greatness of some of its members – I especially recall super-stars like Sam Ervin (D-NC) and Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY) -- the Senate has retained its title of the greatest deliberative body on earth. Let’s keep it that way.

Yes, there are problems with our government. But remember, we the electorate have supreme power, so we have a way to fix those problems. We do that by electing representatives who we don’t expect to agree with us on every issue, but whom we trust to honestly and selflessly exercise the power we have delegated to them through ...

... effective representative government.

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