

# A democracy in danger

"A republic, if you can keep it." That was Benjamin Franklin's response to a woman who wanted to know, upon the enactment of the Constitution, what kind of government the founders had established.

For 219 years, we've managed to keep it. Through the trauma of the Civil War, the excesses of the Gilded Age, the anti-labor crusades of the early 20th century, the upheaval of two world wars and a Great Depression, the struggle for civil rights, the Nixon assault on the Constitution, Cold War nuclear brinkmanship, and the dismantling of the social contract under Ronald Reagan, America has managed to preserve the "republican" legacy of the Founding Fathers. So, was Franklin's implicit reservation about our commitment misplaced?

On the contrary, it now seems prescient, given the degree to which the American populace has relinquished its involvement in self-governance.

Franklin was not concerned with the inevitable challenges to democracy, and to the rule of law upon which it rests, as much as he was about the personal engagement it demands of a free people. Were he alive today, I have no doubt he would be profoundly dismayed with the blithe ignorance of the modern body politic.

Ignorance, cynicism, apathy and despair are not options in a democracy. If a people expects to rule itself through democratic institutions, it must be knowledgeable, interested and engaged. It must "care" enough about the value and the process of self-governance to intelligently participate.

But what have we today? Knowledge of current events is culled from 30-second sound bites, which are about 15 seconds longer than the national attention span. Broadcast news is carefully massaged so as not to conflict with the sponsors' commercial interests; tawdry, titillating crimes get twice the coverage of illegal wars, whose only beneficiaries are corporate cronies of the party in power. The average American, inheritor of the greatest political legacy in history, hasn't the foggiest idea who his or her political representatives are, or what they stand for. What political involvement exists is largely driven by fear, which has replaced idealism and hope as the foundation for self-governance and law.

Would Franklin be reassured?

I'm 66 years old. I hope I'm wrong, but I have little hope that my grandchildren will live in a country that I -- or Benjamin Franklin -- would recognize. There's something profoundly disturbing about a nation (or a state) where same-sex marriage is more threatening than the universal, egregious deceit of its leadership.

Tom M. Liston

Stow