



WHAT IS REPUBLICAN* GOVERNMENT?

PURPOSE OF LESSON 3

Lesson 2 introduced the question, „What kind of government is best?“ This lesson will introduce you to some of the basic ideas the Founders used in answering this question and why they chose the answers they did. It includes an introduction to the idea of republicanism which was of great importance in the development of our government.

When you finish this lesson, you should be able to explain the ideas and terms listed below, how they influenced the Founders, and their importance to our government.

civic virtue

common welfare/common good

republican government

purpose of republican government

balanced powers

mixed constitution

Judeo-Christian heritage

corrupt government

representative democracy

THE ROMAN REPUBLIC

As you have learned, the Founders had read the writings of the natural rights philosophers and had adopted many of their ideas about government. They had also studied and been influenced by philosophers who had written about ancient government. They were particularly interested in what they had read about the government of the ancient Roman Republic which had lasted for nearly 500 years between 509 B.C. and 27 B.C. But why were they so impressed by a government that had existed two thousand years earlier?

The historical accounts of ancient Rome during the greatest days of the Roman Republic described the Roman people as having civic virtue. By this the historians meant that the Ro-

* This is a continuation from the first issue of the journal.

man people were hard-working, simple in their ways of life, honest, and patriotic. Above all, the people loved justice and liberty. Loving their country more than themselves, the common people and the aristocracy shared political powers. The virtuous Romans governed themselves without a king.

As a result, they had a government that provided justice and protected their liberty. It was a government that promoted the common good or the common welfare. This kind of government was called republican government. The main purpose of republican government was to promote the common welfare. This is what made it superior to most other kinds of government which only promoted the welfare of one person, such as a tyrant, or of a particular class of people such as the rich or the poor.

Whether or not the people and government of the Roman Republic were as admirable as they were described by some historians, the accounts of their virtues greatly influenced the Founders.

THE NEED FOR CIVIC VIRTUE

The lesson the Founders learned from the example of the Roman Republic was that in order to have a government that protected their rights and promoted the common welfare, the citizens must possess civic virtue. This meant that citizens must love their country, be honest, be hard-working, and live a modest way of life. These qualities of character needed to be encouraged and developed by the family, by religion, by education, and finally, by the performance of the duties of citizenship.

HOW SHOULD A GOVERNMENT BE ORGANIZED SO IT WILL PROMOTE THE COMMON WELFARE?

In addition to the example of the ancient Roman Republic, the Founders also learned about republican government from writers of their own time. One of the most important of these was Montesquieu (1689-1755), a French writer who was widely admired by Americans. He was often called „the celebrated Montesquieu“, and many of the Founders considered him to be the most important writer on republican government.

BALANCED POWERS

Montesquieu believed that the English system of government was the best example of how a republican government should be organized. He argued that in the English system, the powers of government were divided and balanced among the King and two houses of Parliament a House of Lords and a House of Commons. The King represented the interests of royalty. The House of Lords represented the interests of the nobility. The House of Commons represented the interests of the common people.



A “MIXED CONSTITUTION”

Like the ancient philosophers Aristotle and Cicero, Montesquieu believed that a system which divided and balanced the power of government among the different classes of society, as was done in Great Britain, was the best way to be sure that the government would not be dominated by a single social class. He called this type of government a mixed constitution because it combined the three basic types of government, monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, into one. Since all classes shared power, this kind of government was the best for serving the common welfare.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVIC VIRTUE TO REPUBLICAN GOVERNMENT?

Remember that one of the things that impressed Americans about the Roman Republic was the virtue of its citizens. Many of the supporters of republican government believed that it could only succeed if the citizens were virtuous. Montesquieu agreed. He wrote that the virtue of the good citizen of a republic is really a very simple thing. It meant that citizens must constantly prefer the common welfare to their own private interests. This, the Founders thought, was the virtue of the citizens of ancient Rome.

The Founders believed most Americans had the same virtue as the citizens of Rome. They believed this virtue came from the Americans Judeo-Christian heritage. Citizens who had a sincere interest in the common welfare would behave as good republican citizens should.

WHAT KIND OF SOCIETY IS NECESSARY FOR A REPUBLICAN GOVERNMENT?

Montesquieu had written, and many Founders agreed, that people would only be willing to promote the common welfare instead of their own interests if none of them were too rich or too poor. For this reason, they thought that people of the middle class were most likely to possess civic virtue. People who were very wealthy or very poor would be more likely to promote their own interests at the expense of the common welfare. When a government serves such special interests at the expense of the common welfare, it is said to be corrupt. The Founders believed that great wealth or poverty in a society were the most likely sources of corruption.

WHY IS A SMALL NATION NECESSARY FOR REPUBLICAN GOVERNMENT?

Montesquieu also said that since promoting the common welfare is the main purpose of republican government, this type of government is only possible in small nations. If you tried to have a republican form of government in a large and diverse nation, it would be very difficult for the people to agree about what was best for their common welfare.

WHAT DID REPUBLICAN GOVERNMENT MEAN TO THE FOUNDERS?

Some of the basic ideas of republican government were being put into practice by the English at the time the colonies were being settled in America. The first lesson in the next unit deals with the history of the English government. It provides an important background for understanding the government created by the colonists in America who rebelled against their mother country. But first, we should look at how the ideas of republicanism were developed in America.

We have learned that the Founders believed that the purpose of government should be to protect each individual's natural rights. They also believed that republican government was the best solution to the problem raised by Lesson 2. that is, „What kind of government is most likely to protect the basic rights of the people?“

WHAT IS THE COMMON WELFARE?

Republican government promotes the common welfare. But what is the common welfare? This is not always an easy question to answer. Different people have had and will continue to have very different ideas about what the common welfare is. The Founders, however, believed that a government that promotes the common welfare is one that protects each individual's natural rights.

The Founders also believed that a republican form, of government was the only kind that they should have and they believed that Americans had the civic virtue necessary to make a republic work. However, there were still some problems with republicanism that needed to be worked out.

JAMES MADISON REFINES THE IDEA OF REPUBLICANISM

James Madison was one of the most important of the Founders responsible for creating our Constitution. He said that there was an important difference between a republic and a democracy. He defined a democracy as a small community or nation with a small number of citizens: who meet from time to time to do the tasks of government themselves. The Greek city states and the New England towns were examples of democracies as Madison defined them.

Madison defined a republic as a country in which laws are made and administered by representatives elected by the people. In a republic, all of the powers of the government are given to it by the people. The representatives who run it have their jobs for a limited amount of time or as long as they behave properly. Madison also insisted that members of government should be elected by a large number of the people in the society and not by a small number or a specially favored group. If that happened, the government would only serve the interests of a small group instead of the common welfare.



A REPUBLICAN GOVERNMENT IS A REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

According to Madison, then, a republican government is a representative democracy. It gets its authority, its right to govern, from the people it governs. The citizens of the republic must possess the civic virtue to elect people of wisdom and character to represent them in the government.

THE NEED FOR A CONSTITUTION

There is, however, one additional part of a republican government the Founders thought was necessary, a written constitution. They had a firm belief in the superiority of constitutional government, or constitutionalism. A good constitution, they believed, was one of the most important ways to protect a republican government, which in turn was the only way to protect their natural rights.

As we shall see, the founders' belief in natural rights, republicanism, and constitutionalism greatly influenced their creation of our Constitution. But, before we study Your Constitution, we must learn in the next lesson what constitutional government is and how it is different from other kinds of government.

REVIEWING AND USING THE LESSON

1. What is the purpose of republican government? What characteristics must the people have to maintain such governments?
2. What features of the British government of his day led Montesquieu to think that it was the best way to maintain a republican government?
3. Give two characteristics of a people that Montesquieu and the Founders believed necessary for republican government.
4. How did Madison distinguish between a „democracy“ and a „republic“?
5. A republican government may aim to (a) protect the individual's rights and (b) promote the common welfare. Give examples from history and your own experience in which these two goals conflict with each other.

(Will be continued in the next issue)