

Thanks for the Republic - The Engine of Social Innovation

[Sondra Myers](#) 05 January 2010

Back in 1787 Benjamin Franklin knew how centrally important it was that the new United States of America become a republic but had his doubts about our being able to keep it. Why? What was the source of his skepticism? Looking at the challenges that face our republic in 2009, and then back at Franklin's prescient concern, I understand more than ever how important being a republic is to our "pursuit of happiness" but wonder whether we can keep it.

The first year of the Obama administration has been one of the most fraught with disagreement in my memory. I realize that the problems that Obama inherited—the economic debacle, the wars and the fears of terrorism, along with new ones that have surfaced, coupled with his commitment to progressive change in the areas of health care, education and the environment, make for a complex and controversial agenda. The divisions in our society are striking and are made all the more dangerous by the now "normal" incivilities of our day. Yes, the media, in featuring them, seem not to be doing us a favor—but they are not the perpetrators—they are not the inventors of the

accusations about death panels, socialism and other untruths--so let's not kill the messengers. The free flow of information and public dissent and disagreement are an integral part of the anatomy of a republic; mostly for good, especially when they lead to compromises that we can live with—but the rhetoric of this moment seems to be anti-consensus and compromise.

We as a nation have been here before and we can only hope that, as in the past, the current explosion of organized divisiveness and demonization will pass.

Health care reform is taking a beating but let's hope for the sake of the now- uninsured and for the insured who are confronted with unreasonable restrictions on their insurance plans—that it will not ultimately be beaten.

As for the struggles in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq, I don't know if there are any right answers, morally or militarily, but we can hope that the president and the Congress will use their best thinking in making the almost impossible decisions.

People seem to be obsessed with the president's personality and image; some are obsessively critical of his being selected for and accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, for bowing to the Japanese emperor and even for having a "play date" with his wife in New York. We have more important work to do as citizens than to dwell on such matters.

Many of us have not had the misfortune to live in a truly repressive regime—be it communist or fascist or anything else. But many of us, as immigrants who continue to seek haven in our nation, have. All of us have to appreciate thoughtfully what a relief it is to be in a republic—one that stands for government of the people and by the people and gives us the promise of “liberty and justice for all.” Values don’t get much better than that!

Let’s hold on to those values so that we can hold on to this republic—our earthly salvation-- and be thankful for it, recognizing that it is our good fortune to be here, and it is our responsibility to behave fairly and civically on behalf of the public good so that we can keep it. We can argue politics and policies, we can disapprove of the president’s actions-both public and private—we can express our views in public, however vitriolic—but let’s remember that we can only do that because we live in a republic. As we look forward to the New Year, let’s resolve to heed Ben Franklin’s subtle warning, thank our founders for what they made for us, and continue in the never-ending task of fulfilling the promise of liberty and justice for all the world’s people. That is our task-- and we are privileged to have it.

We have been endowed by our founders with the right to be responsible for the public good-to find innovative solutions to challenging problems—to use our intellects and our imaginations to improve our society. Our republic gives us the power to be social innovators because it is, in

its very being, a social and political innovation. We show our gratitude for the privilege of being its citizens of this republic by living up to the task that is ours.

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