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The origins of the philosophy which informed and influenced the founding of the American republic lies with the 17th century English thinker and proponent of classical liberalism, John Locke. Locke, among other things, extolled the virtue of property. Property bound men together in accordance with the Natural Law. “ In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson proclaimed that all individuals have the right to ‘ Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.’ Jefferson drew his list from the writings of the Enlightenment philosopher John Locke, but he substituted the word happiness for Locke’s property” (Henretta 2000, p. 199). The word “ republic” is the combination of two Latin words, res meaning “ thing” and publica meaning “ public.” A republic is a form of government whose sole ‘ owner’ is the people who form it.

Practically speaking, a republic is a political arrangement which does not have a monarch and which has governmental institutions which represent and are accountable to the people. A republic calls upon its citizens to perform duties to it like defense, electoral participation, obedience to the law, and loyalty to its constitution. A republic envisions a society of property-owning men for whom freedom and the pursuit of happiness are defining principles, provided those freedoms and pursuits do not infringe upon those of another. In a republic every citizen enjoys political equality before the law. There are no recognized aristocracies, no ruling classes, and no rights of birth. The government only has the right to exercise those powers which have been specifically delegated to it. By treating each of its citizens equally and by giving to them voice in government, a republic seeks to rise above the tyranny, despotism, corruption, and unaccountability which were so much a feature of medieval Europe. Government, in Lockean terms, is a

necessary evil which must be limited and accountable in order to be just. It is that justice which the American republic has ever sought uphold.

America of the 1780's was one of economic and political turmoil. Because the government of the Articles of Confederation held no national powers of taxation, it could not fund its affairs without the consent of all the states, a result which was hard to come by. Currency and inflation were also serious issues for the newly founded American Confederation. A national government, on the other hand, would provide one, stable currency. In the 1780's many states faced bankruptcy. As well, the westward settlement of whites into territories beyond the 13 States presented problems with Indians and property division. Though the Confederation managed Westward expansion, it became clear that a strong national government would do the job better. Widespread farmer defaults on loans they could not repay led to civil unrest in places like Massachusetts. In 1786 Shays Rebellion, as it became known, involved several thousand farmers revolting against the government in the same way the colonists had against the British years earlier. Stability seemed out of reach and political dissolution seemed imminent.

Representative democracy is markedly different from pure democracy. Pure democracy involves a system whereby every citizen of voting age votes on every piece of legislation. It was the system characteristic of ancient Athens (though that was just for males). All take part in government, but consensus is hard won and the emotions of the moment can lead to rash decisions which lead to tyranny and/or injustice. In representative democracy, the citizenry elects individuals who gather in a legislative body and propose and vote upon laws. In modern times this has come to involve two house of

legislature. As such, any law requires the consent of both houses so as to ensure that there is widespread support and consensus for any given legal change. There is a degree of removal between the citizen and the law. The government according to the newly ratified Constitution was directly accountable to the people in three main ways. First the members of the House of Representatives were elected to office through a direct and popular vote every two years. Senators were appointed to office by State legislatures for 6 year terms (this changed with the 17th amendment). Thus they were beholden to State governments, themselves elected by the people. Thirdly the President was to be elected to a 4 year term by a popular vote, albeit counted and tallied using the Electoral College system.

Works Cited

Henretta, James A. *America's History: Volume 1: To 1877*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000.