

**The Idea
of the
American Republic**

Richard B. Wells

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Preface

Your author remembers a time when Americans habitually used the phrase "the American Way" to designate what distinguished the United States of America from every other country on earth. The phrase is no longer used as much anymore as it was fifty years ago. The turmoil of the 1960s rendered it quaint in the ears of many – something only one's grandparents might say. Today not many people are still familiar with the phrase, and fewer still know what it meant or what the Idea of the American Republic it represents was and still is. What is the American Republic? Answering that question is a principal topic of this book. What is the American Way of citizenship? That, too, is a principal topic of this book. What is the philosophy of Americanism? That is a principal topic of this book as well. But the core topic of this book is the political crisis facing America today, its causes, and what we as American citizens are bound by duty to do about it.

We Americans are justifiably proud of our republic and hold it up as an example for the world to follow. Yet there is a great irony here in the fact that too few living Americans today understand what is meant and implied by the word "republic" and too many mistakenly assume that our republic has already achieved and perfected what was envisioned for it by our founders. Many Americans tend to confuse the concepts of a republic and a democracy, and some mistakenly think these words are synonyms. Democracy is a key and vital *mechanism* of our or any republic, but democracy as a type of *governance* is not the same thing as a republic, the difference is important, and the survival and well-being of any republic hinges on its citizens understanding this difference and embracing it.

An enemy of a Republic is anyone or anything hostile or injurious to the Republic. The word "enemy" derives from a Latin phrase that meant "not a friend." Most Americans take it for granted that our republic *as a republic* is secure save only from the threat of foreign enemies. It is not. Most of us go about our lives without the realization that the most dangerous enemies of a republic are internal enemies. Ironically, their ranks are comprised almost entirely of people who are *unintentional* enemies of the American Republic, who would be its friend, and who would be deeply offended to be called enemies of the American Republic. They are enemies only because they are not friends of the American Republic. They are not friends of the American Republic only because they do not know what the Idea of the American Republic is. A person cannot be a friend to something unknown to him.

These are well-meaning people who do not understand that the political or religious ideologies and presuppositions they embrace are at their very roots anti-Republic and inimical to the condition that makes liberty with justice for all possible in a Union of free people. Perhaps you yourself are, unknowingly, one of the enemies of our Republic. I am sure you would be scandalized and angry if

anyone were to label you as such. Your author asks you study this book and, when you have done so, *ask yourself* if you merit this label by your own deeds and attitudes. He asks you to *label yourself*.

If this is what you judge your label to be, take some comfort in knowing that it was caused by a chronic failure by our political community and its system of universal public education to properly teach Americans: (1) what our Republic is; (2) what it requires for its survival; (3) that citizenship in a Republic brings with it obligation and duties to be freely taken up by each citizen as a condition of his citizenship; (4) that liberty and justice are moral terms, and government of the people by the people for the people must always and can only be moral government; and (5) that the concepts of moral government and civic morality are social, not religious, concepts and are *objectively* and *universally* definable. Another purpose of this book is to explain all of this as plainly as possible.

Take comfort, too, in knowing that if you don't like the label you give yourself, you can change your circumstances and make yourself a friend of the American Republic. You can do it today. All you have to do is make yourself be a *civic* citizen and not content yourself with being merely an entitlement citizen. It is never too late this side of the grave to do this. This book will explain what you must do. And you need never admit to anyone, other than yourself, that you were ever anything else than a civic American citizen. Your author certainly doesn't care who you are today; he only cares who you will choose to be tomorrow and in the days to come afterward.

The fact is that today, and for a long while now, our Republic is and has been in danger of turning into something far different. If the Republic falls to a different form of government the cost to the great majority of us will be our liberty and the preservation of those very personal rights each of us feels is our due – and for the preservation of which our Republic was founded in the first place. The loss of our Republic is the loss of personal liberty, the loss of justice, and is our common subjugation under a ruling class. In the simplest possible terms, the most basic tenet of a Republic is nothing more and nothing less than this: We are all in this thing together and depend on each other to make it work.

The previous statements will be regarded by some as extremely controversial. Yet your author is far from being the first person to come to the viewpoints expressed here or from being the discoverer of the ideas and principles discussed in these pages. Mortimer J. Adler and Peter Wolff wrote,

It would be natural to assume that the schooling of every American included the reading of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, and *The Federalist*. If there is any relation at all between schooling and preparation for intelligent citizenship, this much first hand acquaintance with the principles and institutions of our government should be given to all our country's future citizens in the course of their schooling. But very few of the graduates of our colleges, and even fewer of those who have completed high school, have ever seen the inside of *The Federalist*, and many have never even heard the work mentioned. The number – at either level – who have carefully read the Declaration and the Constitution is almost as small.

– Adler and Wolff, *The Great Ideas Program*, vol. I, "A General Introduction to the Great Books and to a Liberal Education," pp. 159-160, Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1959.

Your author wishes he could say the situation is no better today than it was in 1959, but unfortunately that is not true. The situation is worse today than it was in 1959.

This no doubt unintentional but still systematic ignorance of our form of government and the ideas of our Republic has long been matched by an equal, or perhaps even worse, unintentional but systematic lack of education in (with accompanying ignorance of) the most fundamental precepts of the duties of citizenship in a free society. In the foreword of the Civil Air Patrol's 1960 *Moral Leadership Manual*, used in the educational program for CAP cadets, Brigadier General Stephen D. McElroy wrote,

This text is the result of an effort to bring into focus some of those basic ingredients of character and personality which are essential to effective citizenship. . . We live in the midst of times which are most unforgiving of mediocrity and imbalance. Mankind has probably faced no previous period in which so many depend upon the able citizenship of the individual. Our world becomes smaller with each new day. It becomes increasingly difficult for any local event to pass unnoticed or unfelt by the many. This is at once a wonderful and a sobering fact – wonderful in that goodness accomplished can well have its positive effect upon all and sobering because one's mistakes in judgment and consequent actions can also bring to bear such universal adverse results.

In this same manual its author, Chaplain (Lt. Col.) Vernon F. Kullowatz, wrote of "statements of national faith," among which was

In order for government to assume its proper role as the tool "for the people," we as individuals must each assume our own responsibilities toward that government. Here is where our moral obligations enter. We must thoroughly acquaint ourselves with those seeking office – their political philosophies, moral and spiritual attitudes, past records of accomplishments, etc. – so that, by our intelligent vote, the men who are placed in government will, in fact, be our true representatives and so that when Congress acts, we act!

Career servicemen and women, by the nature of what they do, are often acutely more aware of the fragile nature of our Republic and cognizant of dangers to it than other citizens, even if they are not always so cognizant of how to safeguard liberty and justice without endangering it in other ways. The fundamental safeguard of liberty and of the republic has been known and enunciated since the eighteenth century. John Philpot Curran in a 1790 political speech said,

The condition upon which God hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance, which condition if he break, servitude is at once the consequence of his crime and the punishment of his guilt.

A like statement that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty is attributed to Thomas Jefferson. But it does little good to be vigilant if one does not know what one is to be on watch against. And who are the watchmen to be? That, too, has long been known. The watchmen are the Republic's citizens, each and every one without exception. Too many of us today are asleep on our watch.

This book is a work of political philosophy. But it is a book from the old school, which means it is philosophy *put into practice*. Philosophers of today have a well-earned reputation for admiring problems and examining them from all angles without lifting a finger to attempt to *solve* the problems or even to suggest there are solutions. This is in stark contrast with the works of Kant, of Rousseau, of Mill, of Locke, of Aristotle, of Cicero, or of any of the other renowned practical philosophers of bygone days. Philosophical theory without the accompaniment of its reduction to practice is vain and useless. Allan Bloom was right to criticize the modern American philosophy departments of our universities in *The Closing of the American Mind* when he wrote,

The third island of the university is the almost submerged old Atlantis, the humanities. In it there is no semblance of order, no serious account of what should and should not belong, or of what its disciplines are trying to accomplish or how. . . . The humanities are like the great old Paris Flea Market where, amidst masses of junk, people with a good eye found castaway treasures that made them rich. Or they are like a refugee camp where all the geniuses driven out of their jobs and countries by unfriendly regimes are idling, either unemployed or performing menial tasks. . . .

Most interesting of all, lost amidst this collection of disciplines, modestly sits philosophy. It has been dethroned by political and theoretical democracy, bereft of the passion or the capacity to rule. Its story defines in itself our whole problem. Philosophy once proudly proclaimed that it was the best way of life, and it dared to survey the whole, to seek first causes of all things, and not only dictated its rules to the special sciences but constituted and ordered them. The classic philosophic books are philosophy in action, doing precisely these things. . . . Now they are just books on the shelf. Democracy took away philosophy's privileges, and philosophy could not decide whether to fade away or take a job.

Some will see what is written in this book as unduly pessimistic or alarmist or simply untrue. It is none of these, although denial is a natural psychological response to the unpleasanties it paints. Still, the burden of proof rests upon the author of this book and he acknowledges that this burden is his to bear. You, the reader, will be the judge of whether this burden of proof has been met. However, the right to make this judgment comes with an obligation the reader – again, you – must freely agree to assume. This is to give this reading open-minded and thoughtful consideration, to discuss the ideas presented here with others whose judgment and good character you respect, and to debate these ideas calmly but seriously. If you are unwilling to accept this obligation and fulfill it, you might as well close this book right now and save yourself time and aggravation because in that case you are choosing to make yourself part of the problem and to not be a friend of the American Republic.

At its innermost core, this book is about what it means to be an American citizen. Citizenship is not a right, nor is it a state of being. To be an American citizen is not only to accept the rights and privileges of being an American, but also to freely take up the duties and responsibilities citizenship requires, and to understand the obligation you freely take upon yourself. American citizenship means action; specifically it means acting to uphold, cherish, protect, and perfect the Idea of the American

Republic. This book is about this Idea, what the necessary ideals of our Republic are, and why these ideals must be understood and vigilantly guarded from enemies of our republic, foreign and domestic. Understanding all of this intelligently, and then taking up the duties of American citizenship, is how you make yourself a true Patriot of your country.

In 1961 President Kennedy called upon all Americans to "ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." Your author repeats this call here. What you must decide for yourself is whether or not you will. Will you choose to *be* an American citizen?

Richard B. Wells

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Richard B. Wells was born in 1953 and grew up in Iowa. He received his Bachelor of Science degree with distinction from Iowa State University in 1975. From 1975 to 1993 he was employed with the Hewlett Packard Company, initially in Silicon Valley in northern California and later in Boise, Idaho. He received his Master of Science degree from Stanford University in 1979 and his Doctor of Philosophy degree from the University of Idaho in 1985. At HP he worked as a product development engineer, project leader, project manager, and production engineering manager. From 1981 until 1993 he served as a volunteer Affiliate Professor for the University of Idaho Department of Electrical Engineering. In 1993 he left HP to accept an appointment as Assistant Professor of Electrical Engineering with the University of Idaho, where he currently holds the ranks of Professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering, Professor of Neuroscience, Adjunct Professor of Material Science & Engineering, and Adjunct Professor of Philosophy. He also holds an affiliate appointment with the Department of Physiology & Biophysics at the University of Washington School of Medicine. Dr. Wells serves as Associate Chair of the Department of Electrical & Computer Engineering, Associate Director of the MRC Institute, Director of the Laboratories for Computational Neuroscience and Technology Research, and is past Director of the University of Idaho Graduate Program in Neuroscience. He serves as Chair of the Curriculum Committee for the UI Department of Electrical & Computer Engineering, Member of the Curriculum Committees for the UI College of Engineering and the Graduate Program in Neuroscience, and as Member of the University of Idaho University Curriculum Committee. He has served as a councilman on the University of Idaho Research Council and the University of Idaho University-Wide Programs Council. Dr. Wells has served as an External Reviewer and as a Panelist for the National Science Foundation as well as a referee for numerous technical journals and international conferences. He is a Life Member of Sigma Xi and has served as a Mentor in the McNair Scholars Program. He has been major professor or graduate committee member for more than seventy graduate students from a number of academic disciplines. He has also served as an Advisor for the Junior Achievement Program in Palo Alto, California. He is a Registered Professional Engineer in the state of Idaho and is an elected Senior Member of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers. He is a member of the American Association of University Professors. Dr. Wells holds four U.S. patents and has published more than fifty professional papers. He has voted in every national election since 1972 and served as Campaign Strategist for a candidate running for the Idaho Legislature in the 1990 election. He has been politically active as a citizen in one way or another every year since 1968.