

Democracy: Ancient and Modern

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Précis

When we cast a ballot in our democracy, we not only make an important political choice for our neighbors and ourselves, but we actively assert the importance of human capabilities. Democracy, whether instituted in classical Athens or the United States of America, relies upon a noble faith in the choices of one's fellow citizens and continues to expand the rights and equality of whatever nation adheres to its ideals. This paper studies the history of Athenian democracy, as well as its subsequent downfall, and compares it with some themes of the founding of the republic in America. It determines that the form of government differs significantly in the two states, but is joined by underlying beliefs in freedom and the sovereignty of the citizens. Democracy and democratic allegiance shows itself a persistent and dynamic force once established.

Introduction. Democracy: The Choice to Rule

A free government is a complicated piece of machinery . . . not yet well comprehended by the artists of the age, and still less by the people. – John Adams

Every November, Americans participate in the closest thing our secularized nation has to a state religion. By going to the polls and electing our governors, whether digitally or by pencil, we the people take into our hands the responsibilities of setting the proper course for our nation. No longer do we sacrifice at the altars of gods to secure health, prosperity, and victory; instead, we use paper ballots to elect our fellow citizens to office so that they may provide these blessings. We actively assert our citizenship by stepping into the poll booth, and for some it is perhaps the highest duty they can perform.

Our democratic systems may have their skeptics and their detractors, but our nation has peacefully voted ourselves new governments since its inception and we see no major alternatives to our politics. Surely, we are set in our democratic ways, and voting, that is, making political choices, is the cornerstone of democracy. In casting our ballot, we make an important political choice for our neighbors and ourselves and make an important statement about human capabilities. Democracy, as instituted in classical Athens (ca. 500-322 B.C.) as well as the United States of America and other modern states, relies upon a noble faith in the choices of one's fellow citizens.

This thesis explores the progression of ancient democracy in the political life of Athens, as well as its downfall and subsequent deference to authoritarian regimes, and then compares it to some prevailing motives behind the American Revolution. In

building a state based upon popular sovereignty, Athens relied on thoughts of equality, freedom, and the choices of the citizens. Despite differences in form and configuration, this thesis shows that the original governments of Athens and America both valued concepts of human worth and independence, and consequently, their democratic institutions expanded over time.

Democracy, literally, might (*kratos*) of the people (*demos*), is a political system wherein the citizens at large ultimately hold the sovereign power and their national will is enacted somehow by their government. Democracy is to an extent a quantitative classification, compared to other traditional classifications of government,¹ but it is more than just rule by *to plethos* or majority-rule. It holds a moral value that reflects its extraordinary reliance on the citizenry as the primary political actor, numerous and varied individuals acting as one body, with one intent.² Of course, democracy is a social construction and has changed with society, so that democracy has assumed different forms in different contexts. The classifications of the many democratic models are generally one of two major types: direct/participatory or liberal/representative;³ the former describes the classical Athenian government and the latter our own American model.

Modern partisan terminology aside, there is a fundamental difference between “democrats” and “republicans.” Whereas a democrat believes the people as the source of authority actively take part in the government to resolve conflict, someone who supports

¹ “Polyarchy” compared to oligarchy (rule by privileged few, aristocracy being a shade of this), monarchy (rule by one), and a mixed type of constitution. Locke, *Second Treatise*, 10. 132. Compare Plato *Republic*, 544c and Aristotle *Politics*, III. 7, neither of which thinks highly of democracy.

² The idiosyncrasies of the sort which plagued the democracy of Athens or others, including restricting citizenship to males, endorsing slavery, and imperial brutality are discussed elsewhere by more informed scholars. I, for my part, believe that such quirks are a product of the wider culture found in the ancient world as reflected in novel governmental institutions.

³ Held, 4.

a *res publica* does not prefer one type sovereign to another. The republican's concern lies not with who governs, but rather how. When the state is literally a collection of citizens' interests, it must rule on behalf of the people. "When the governor, however entitled, makes not the law, but his will, the rule," not for his subjects, "but for his own private, separate advantage,"⁴ republican government has ended, and a tyrannical force has claimed what was a public good for its private use.

Republics are found in all types of government, regardless of the sovereign body. One need only think of the aristocracy of the Roman Republic, or the constitutional monarchy of Britain following the Glorious Revolution to find governments that were not properly *by* the people, but were arguably *for* them. In addition, democracy is not a guarantee against tyranny, as the overwhelming majority often oppresses a minority of the population. However, a republican spirit should be cultivated most easily in a democracy, since, in theory, the voice of the people and the voice of the government are the same.

A word also on freedom, a concept of utmost importance in any discussion of democracy. Like democracy itself, cultures construct images of liberty that are altered over time and are specific to their social contexts. In the ancient world, freedom was considered a result of particular constitutions, whereas modern, post-Enlightenment thinkers tend to consider liberty, in some degree, to be intrinsic to the human being. More recent philosophers such as John Locke began to organize a coherent belief, liberalism, which places freedom at the forefront of all affairs.

Nevertheless, respect for the individual and his free choices have guided many states throughout time, and this began in classical Athens. To the Greeks, their political

⁴ Locke, *Sec. Treat.* 18. 199.

systems were moderate, rational, and independent compared to the slavish barbarians surrounding their small world. Indeed, the ancient Athenian democracy just as much as our own, was based on the individual choices of its citizens. Although they had no sense of civil rights *per se*, “ in practice they certainly knew about the privileges and freedoms connected with their democratic constitutions.”⁵

Athens devised a government that depended upon its citizens to take an active stance in the state, and trusting in their choices, it allowed the people’s voice to rule. Their democracy was suppressed by a Macedonian monarchy, then by Rome’s Republic, and their democratic ideas fell out of favor for millennia. Yet the founding Americans, fostered by Locke’s ideals of freedom and confident in their fellow citizens, desired to create their own popular government. To do so, they blended new ideas of freedom and natural rights with the traditions they learned from the ancient world. Since nearly all ancient political theorists encountered by colonial Americans were decidedly anti-democratic,⁶ it is no wonder that the Americans adopted a republican system.

Although America rejected the direct democracy of the Athenians, it prides itself in its liberal founding and the equality of its citizens. Both states originated as republics without much direct citizen control, but over time the demands of the people furthered democratic causes and the governments evolved to incorporate the concerns of its citizens to a remarkable extent. To be sure, America is far removed from Athens, but we can learn about our own history and beliefs as a nation by studying the lives and thoughts of those amazing Greeks who paved the way for future generations of free peoples.

⁵ Hansen, 176.

⁶ e.g. Aristotle and Xenophon from the Greeks, and Cato and Cicero from the Romans.

Chapter I: Athens

It is only the Athenians who, fearless of consequences, confer their benefits not from calculations of expediency, but in the confidence of liberality. – Pericles

The government that emerged from the dark ages in Attica (12th – 9th centuries B.C.) was at first monarchical,⁷ with the *basileus* of Athens holding sway over the surrounding villages. However, perhaps in the eighth century three executives chosen from aristocratic families (the *basileus*, *polemarchos*, and the eponymous *archon*) who attended to public affairs replaced this chief. These, along with six *thesmothetai*, charged with legislation, were elected from a small pool of aristocratic families,⁸ and served alongside the senatorial Council of the Areopagus. While such a mixed government of separated powers was commonplace in the ancient world,⁹ the unique course of Athens' history would take that city ever farther from the restrictive traditional systems that marked the average *polis*.

The Athenians, as far as is known, did not recognize their government as *demokratia* until sometime into the fifth century. Rather, early accounts use the term *isonomia*, equality before the law.¹⁰ It was this term that defined the spirit of Athens' constitution, in the words of Aeschylus, “*demou kratousa cheir*” (the

⁷ The *Constitution of the Athenians* (328-325) provides an account of the history and development of the early Athenian state from the monarchy to the contemporary age.

⁸ Pomeroy, 111.

⁹ Rival powers Rome and Sparta both had mixed constitutional governments, though oligarchic.

¹⁰ Vlastos, 337-339.

ruling hand of the people).¹¹ The Athenians decided to break away from the dominion of a king or elite ruling clique, and to entrust political power to the ordinary people, relying on their rational abilities.

The Reforms of Solon

To be fair, the Athenian democracy officially began some time after Solon, but this influential legislator's aristocratic government made great headway for the emergence of democratic institutions. Draco, the semi-legendary lawgiver of the seventh century, had codified a strict constitution for Athens. The city-state contained a disciplined system of laws and a nascent national identity, but many domestic problems, especially matters of economic inequality, still beleaguered it. The Athenians sought Solon, a notable poet and aristocratic war hero, to draft laws that might ease the class tension.¹² He was an appealing choice to his contemporaries, so he claims, for his ability to satisfy the political needs of both the poor and wealthy made him trustworthy to each side. The Aristotelian *Athenaion Politeia* recalls his poetry, in which he explained the position he took between and against the parties of the privileged and the poor:

To the common people I have given such honor and privilege as is sufficient for them, granting them neither less nor more than their due.
For those possessed of power and outstanding through wealth I had equal regard, taking care that they should suffer no injury.
Firmly I stood, holding out my strong shield over both of them, and I did not allow either party to triumph over the other in violation of justice.¹³

The words of Solon here and elsewhere indicate that he believed his position as lawmaker to be one of protector, guaranteeing safety to all parties from the attacks of their enemies.

¹¹ Quoted by Vlastos, 338.

¹² Pomeroy, 113-114.

¹³ *Const. Ath.* 12. 1.

Looking to enhance active participation in national affairs, Solon first aimed to help the poor of Attica, although he refused to take up their favored cause of land redistribution.¹⁴ Through a series of reforms in the first decade of the sixth century known as the *seisachtheia*, the “shaking off” of burdens, he promoted the cause of the oppressed lower classes and meant to check some of the privileges of the wealthy. Although he generally respected the aristocracy’s ancestral claim to property, during the *seisachtheia* he eased the onerous debts held against the poor and attacked the program of debt slavery, proclaiming that no citizen would lose his body or family to a creditor. Moreover, he went so far as to redeem and return those Athenians that had been enslaved and sold because of debt failure, a point of pride for Solon who says:

I brought home to Athens, to their fatherland, many Athenians who, lawfully or unlawfully, had been sold abroad, and others who, having fled their country under dire constraints of debts, no longer spoke the Attic tongue – so wide had been their wanderings.

I also restored to freedom those who here at home had been subjected to shameful servitude, and trembled before their masters.¹⁵

Protection from slavery in such turbulent times surely will earn endorsement from all classes of people, and a common identity as free men can unite a factious nation. By stating that even the lowliest Athenian was too good for chains, Solon made a profound statement about the nobility of his citizens and the government’s role in honoring that nobility.

His constitutional reforms also separated the people into four classes according to their income, with each class enjoying certain privileges. The lowest class was the *thetes*, comprising the poor or landless citizens. While they were ineligible for elected office,

¹⁴ Vlastos compares *isonomia*, the mainstream democratic ideal, with the more radical *isomoria*, often associated with the controversial issue of land redistribution, which contributed its share to political instability in the late Roman Republic.

¹⁵ *Const. Ath.* 12, 4.

Solon allowed the *thetes* to attend the Assembly and sit in the jury pool for trials (*heliaia*)¹⁶ thereby granting even the most vulnerable of the citizenry a chance to be involved politically with his peers. Despite his broadening of political power to members of all economic classes, the government established by Solon was undeniably aristocratic. Although every male citizen, regardless of property now had the ostensible right to participate in Athenian politics, only the wealthiest two classes were eligible for the highest magistracies.¹⁷ Solon himself never referred to his constitution as “democratic” nor even “isonomous,” but he preferred the more neutral *eunomia*,¹⁸ while stressing the equal justice applied in his laws,¹⁹ indicating a practical approach to resolving civil strife. Had he chosen either side of the class struggle, he could have assumed the role of tyrant with the ensuing power in this highly charged time.²⁰

Solon, more than any other who had come before, established the concepts of citizenship and political responsibility. Perhaps it was fear of the constant social strife that led him to emphasize a harmonic population, therefore causing him to work for the benefit of each group.²¹ Ironically, though, another of his laws states that in times of civil strife (*stasis*), any citizen who would not choose a side would suffer to lose the rights of citizenship. This was intended to force every citizen to make a moral choice and adopt whichever cause they deemed worthy, “that he should offer them his support and co-operation in the dangers they face,” rather than waiting safely on the sidelines to see which side gains the upper hand. With this decree, Solon aimed to activate a vigorous

¹⁶ Pomeroy, 115.

¹⁷ Pomeroy, 115.

¹⁸ Vlastos, 158.

¹⁹ *Const. Ath.* 12. 1.

²⁰ *Const. Ath.* 11. 2.

²¹ Woodruff, 72.

political body in hopes of squelching violence and injustice within the city. Solon's dream of an active citizenry is related to the overwhelming aspect of the Athenian state, which was so colossal that it often overtook the various other cultural conventions, so that a citizen might see himself as an agent of the state before all else.

Solon's novel efforts on behalf of the whole populace of the burgeoning city-state awarded him continuous fame as one of the founders of classical Athens.²² Throughout his writings, however, we see an independent mind aimed at guaranteeing the freedom and satisfying the needs of his various fellow citizens, with justice for all. He was neither an oligarch nor a democrat, but believed in *eunomia*, good laws for an active, virtuous, and free *demos*. Perhaps, with the gift of hindsight, the greatest fault we can find with Solon is his inability to warn the Athenians sufficiently against the tyrant's rule, and the consequences of political disharmony. During his exile, the Athenians gave their city over to a tyrannical regime, under Solon's cousin Peisistratus and his sons (*ca.* 560-510). Nevertheless, ancients and moderns alike recognize the fundamental place Solon holds in the history of free, democratic governments.

Cleisthenes and the "Athenian Revolution"

The *tyrannos*, in the ancient world, did not carry the grave connotations that the modern mind connects with a "tyrant."²³ Indeed, much of the political strength of Peisistratus and other tyrants came from keeping the people happy with social projects,

²² Plutarch (*Life of Solon*, 5) has a different view. He states that Solon's laws are no more than spider webs, catching only the weak, but easily shredded by the powerful, and were merely lip service to the poor.

²³ Most likely due to our national foundings and the prolonged freedom from daily life under a benign monarchy.

including economic growth, support for the arts, and ambitious building programs.²⁴

Nevertheless, as they say, power corrupts. In 514, an angered lover slew Peisistratus' son Hipparchus, who was ruling with his brother, and Athens suffered afterwards: "the paranoid autocracy of Hippias replaced the benign government of two aristocrats."²⁵

Although the Athenians had accepted his father's government, they had tired of Hippias' embittered rule after four years, for then a Spartan force, with a divine charge to liberate (*eleutheroun*) the Athenians, deposed and exiled the tyrant and his family across the Aegean Sea.²⁶ It was only a matter of a few years before the Athenians, still reeling from the brutal rule of the tyrant, elected their first democratic government.

Following the fifty-year tyranny, two aristocrats struggled for control of Athens.²⁷ Isagoras, elected archon in 508 with support from the Spartan King Cleomenes, attempted to establish an oligarchy in the city. His rival Cleisthenes, who took up the call of the Athenian populace and won their support, opposed him and was consequently exiled.²⁸ It is at this point that the people of Athens, alongside the oligarchic government imposed upon them, rose up against the administration of Isagoras. The Athenians forced them to fortify themselves atop the Acropolis, and following a three-day siege, Isagoras and the oligarchs supporting him were banished from the city.²⁹ This revolutionary act is worth noting in that it apparently burst forth spontaneously among the people.³⁰ Cleisthenes was in exile, and no ancient history names any aristocrats or military leaders

²⁴ Pomeroy, 117-119.

²⁵ Pomeroy, 120.

²⁶ *Const. Ath.* 19. 4-6.

²⁷ Ober, ch. 4, 37-38.

²⁸ Pomeroy, 122.

²⁹ *Const. Ath.* 20. 3.

³⁰ Ober (46 ff.) compares the actions of 508 to the French Revolution in 1789, citing the refusal of legislative bodies to disband at the order of the executive, the popular siege of a militarily controlled fortress, a negotiated settlement in favor of the people, and the violent punishment of "counter-revolutionaries."

associated with the popular crowd, although it is hard to imagine that certain powerful citizens did not vocally support the uprising.³¹ Nevertheless, it was a thoroughly popular movement, and “after the political power had come into the hands of the people in this way, Cleisthenes became their chief and leader (*prostates*).”³²

Therefore, Cleisthenes became ruler of Athens on a swell of popular support and “the strength of the demos was such that simply returning to the status quo ante was out of the question.”³³ His novel reforms are widely considered the unofficial founding of the Athenian democracy, granting unprecedented power to the people. He aimed to dissolve the power of aristocratic families by dividing the people into ten tribes, replacing the four Ionian tribes, which dated to the dark ages.³⁴ By “mixing up” the people as much as possible into more egalitarian institutions, he diminished previously held allegiances in favor of the newly regulated and inclusive system. Cleisthenes also expanded the Council of 400, which deliberated legislative affairs prior to their being brought to the Assembly, to 500 men, with 50 chosen annually from each tribe by lot.

The military underwent reforms so that each of the new tribes elected their own officers, including their *strategos*, or top general, who was eligible for reelection each year, making this a top post in the new Athenian government, which was moving toward chance lottery for many offices.³⁵ Ostracism, the famed Athenian tool against overambitious individuals was established in the reign of Cleisthenes, although it remained unused for several decades.³⁶

³¹ Ober, 41-43.

³² *Const. Ath.* 20. 4.

³³ Mossé (2000), 151.

³⁴ Pomeroy, 112.

³⁵ Pomeroy, 122. Pericles is the most famous *stratēgos*, and used his office to become the leading figure of his day.

³⁶ Pomeroy, 131-132.

The chance lottery came to be a feature of ancient democracy, assuming the ability of even common citizens (“in good standing”) to debate important political matters.³⁷ This is the fundamental concept of democracy that Cleisthenes instituted: the acknowledgment that any citizen is just as worthy to rule and decide cases as another. It was their reliance on popular decisions in law courts and assemblies, unbridled by any aristocratic agenda, to solve political disputes that was so novel at the time, and which is today perhaps taken for granted. Recognizing that democracy requires a strong national identity, Cleisthenes rearranged society in order to better align the citizens to the new political realities dawning upon them. By involving people in the process, and indeed forcing the reluctant to join, the Athenians stressed the importance of the individual citizen in the working of the government, and for as long as their nation respected this importance, it prospered.

Even the “founding father” of Athenian democracy³⁸ is not above having his detractors. Some scholars take issue with Ober’s explanation of the actions of 508 as a “collective act of political self-definition.”³⁹ They argue that we must consider the situation in more realistic terms, emphasizing what Cleisthenes (and, equally, his clan) might have gained from his reforms. Considering the political context and possible benefits to his family, we might skeptically consider how great his concern for the *demos* was in constructing new laws.⁴⁰ Indeed, in all ages, a fine line exists between democracy

³⁷ Woodruff, 34-35.

³⁸ Woodruff, 45.

³⁹ In particular, Samons (1998) says that Ober arrives at his conclusions because prevalent issues, such as the supposed Iron Law of Oligarchy, which states a small faction of society is directing every government at all times, are “simply neglected” in his reasoning.

⁴⁰ Samons, 118.

and demagoguery, but the institutions Cleisthenes strengthened, for whatever motive, led to an expansively democratic state that established a tradition of liberty still alive today.

Democracy in the Fifth Century

In the century following the rule of Cleisthenes, a series of democratic reformers succeeded him and continued the democratic regime, in which time Athens grew from a mighty *polis* to the seat of an empire. The same time that ostracism, the famed weapon against tyranny, became popular, selection of the archon also began to be chosen by a lottery, giving the supreme executive power over to chance.⁴¹ This alone would have been a blow to traditionalists, but as an added result, since archons entered the Council of the Areopagus after their term, in time it would diminish the Council's aristocratic nature. Riding the growing popular swell, a reformer named Ephialtes aimed to limit the power of the aristocracy, and consequently stripped much of the Council's judicial powers, leaving it to decide supreme cases of homicide and religious transgressions.⁴²

Pericles, who wielded great power through the elected office of *strategos*, further restrained the Council of the Areopagus, and introduced a novel idea to Greek politics: public pay for public service. Insisting on embracing as much of the citizenry as possible, he instituted a small wage for serving on the popular juries, whose responsibilities were increasing with the decline of the Council. Public pay would later be expanded to many other offices and duties.⁴³ While Socrates claims in the *Gorgias* (515e) that this pay (*misthophoria*) would lead his fellow citizens to become complacent and idle, it indeed "brought the poorest Athenians into active participation in

⁴¹ *Const. Ath.* 22. 4ff.

⁴² Pomeroy, 142-143.

⁴³ Pomeroy, 147.

democracy.”⁴⁴ Until this vital step in the construction of a democratic government, the lower classes who could not afford to take a day off work were *de facto* excluded from service.

The historical Pericles is perhaps better known as the general of the Peloponnesian war and the architect of the Athenian empire, but his domestic policies did much to instill the democratic zeal with which the imperial arm extended its reach. His ideals of democracy resound loudly through the centuries, communicated through his Funeral Oration, the “most famous of all celebrations of democratic citizenship”⁴⁵ as recorded by his contemporary Thucydides (2.37-42). For all of her freedoms and liberality, Pericles claims that Athens is the “school of Hellas.”⁴⁶ He reminds his audience of the proud goals for which his compatriots had so valiantly fought and died, namely their unconquerable freedoms and liberalities, both public and private. Under Pericles, Athens was termed a *demokratia*, the first and greatest government built upon the sovereignty of the entire citizenry.⁴⁷

Unfortunately, the great and free political structure championed by Pericles dissipated, in large part because of the empire that he as much as anyone fostered. While the empire drew much of its strength from the dynamic power of the democracy, it also spelt trouble for the Athenians when their imperial hubris caused them to overstep their bounds. Like all swiftly felicitous peoples, the Athenians began to rely too greatly on their established institutions and the active citizenship mandated by Solon began to wane

⁴⁴ Woodruff, 51.

⁴⁵ Orwin, 554.

⁴⁶ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. R. Crawley.

⁴⁷ Compare Thucydides description of Pericles’ government to be “democracy in name, but in practice government by the first citizen.” Plutarch, *Life of Pericles*, 9. This says in effect that Pericles effected the democratic visage of Athens to carry out his own personal agenda – the hallmark of the tyrant.

in the face of luxury and idleness. The failures of the Athenian military and assemblies toward the Peloponnesian War's end show a crumbling democratic system. This exhausted and disillusioned state faintly reflected the former glory of Athens, and no doubt reveals the terrible consequences total war can wreak on even those well-established nations.

After their defeat, the Athenians had an oligarchy of Thirty Tyrants imposed by Sparta, who conducted themselves with utmost abandon and violence, led in part by one particularly cruel Critias, a cousin of Plato and a character in some dialogues.⁴⁸ Their atrocities, like those of the oligarchs a century earlier, were opposed by a popular uprising. A brief and bloody civil war sprung up between democrats and oligarchs, and eventually the popular party triumphed. Sparta (of all *poleis*) supervised the first recorded amnesty between the two parties,⁴⁹ and with this dearly bought social harmony, the Athenians together attempted to rebuild their democracy from the rubble.

We read in the first century of Athenian democracy a narrative of a great people living lives and building a society based on great ideas. The wealth of Greek sources provides us a story of a unified nation progressively acquiring the tools of handing control of their political destinies to the citizenry as a whole. To do so took years of turbulent exchange between supporters of democratic reforms and the aristocratic control of oligarchic factions. To be sure, no government yet, classical Athens included, has attained pure or direct democracy. Nevertheless, the Athenians took greater steps than their predecessors to advance the democratic ideals that drove their spirit, and approach a government by the will of the entire citizenry.

⁴⁸ Pomeroy, 226-227.

⁴⁹ Pomeroy, 227.

The sources we have from the early democracy centers around the remarkable politicians who, for whatever motive, took up the cause of empowering the masses, often at the cost of the propertied classes. However, we should not lose sight of the masses themselves in our study of this vibrant era in our common heritage. For these great men of Athens, as all great men whom we study, are particularly indebted to the society that fosters them and their beliefs. The diversity and consequent tolerance of this cultural and economic hub contributed to the democratic atmosphere; it is hard to imagine a Spartan Socrates speaking out against the reign of the Kings during a long career before finally being silenced. More than Cleisthenes himself, we should thank the Athenian people more for debating and accepting his reforms, and then defending them for centuries. Believing in the worth of the common person, the Greeks began the traditions of free speech and other personal freedoms, and they began democracy as we know it, by relying on regular citizens to make political decisions.

Chapter II: The Hellenistic World

That Greece in ancient times, once so flourishing in its wealth, dominion and glory, fell through this single evil, the excessive liberty and license of its meetings. – Cicero

The fourth century brought the promise of a new life for Athenian democracy, but one not destined for this world. The magnificent era that contributed the fundamentals of philosophy and demonstrated remarkable military exploits also saw the demise of ancient democracy. Only a decade after the devastatingly long Peloponnesian War, Athens and the other *poleis* began fighting anew, first between Sparta and Thebes with her allies, then between Thebes and the rest. The violent upheavals that shook political and social realms throughout Greece were to foretell the ultimate collapse of city-state autonomy under foreign empires. After losing their independent democracy, Athenians would first endure the rule of Macedonian kings and then the Roman Senate.

Macedon

While the Greeks were engaged in military squabbles amongst themselves, the kingdom of Macedon to the north, long considered inconsequential by the Greeks, was gaining power under the skilled reformer Philip II. With the memory of Persian invasion not too far removed in the past, astute Athenian politicians, as was their custom, entered the public debate in the assemblies. Many orators, such as Demosthenes and Aeschines who were often at odds with each other's policies, spoke out against this new threat of foreign attack in hopes of alarming their fellow citizens to the challenges their democracy

faced. Nevertheless, years of inter-*polis* warfare distracted enough of the Greeks' resources that they were unable to prepare themselves properly for the confrontation until it was too late.⁵⁰

Like the Persian crisis in the previous century, the Macedonian threat elicited calls from politicians in Athens calling for a strategic stand against hostilities. Perhaps the most notable Athenian of this era, Demosthenes declared in his *Philippics* the end of their freedom amassing on their northern border. After taking time to secure his own turbulent territory, Philip turned on his southern neighbors. He met a small force of united Greeks making their final stand against Macedonian aggression at the battle of Chaeronea, which was to prove the most decisive battle in the history of the independent *poleis*. The Greeks, who like their ancestors against the Persians were fighting for their homeland and liberty, suffered defeat at the hands of Philip and were humbled to submission. Therefore, the proud freedom of the Athenians, continuous for nearly two hundred years, abruptly came to a halt at the hands of a king, leading a people they considered barbaric.

Rule of Athens by Macedonian monarchs, secured by Alexander and his successor generals (*diadochoi*), continued for some time unabated, though certainly not unchallenged. Alexander dealt kindly with Athens, showing respect for the city-state which once boasted a glorious empire and was now a mere province of Macedon. Later, Antipater disenfranchised up to twenty thousand citizens, and, worse still, imposed a Macedonian garrison near the city, symbolizing the loss of independence.⁵¹ The death of Antipater brought a tumultuous time for the Athenians, wherein they forced his successor

⁵⁰ Pomeroy, 262.

⁵¹ Mossé, 100.

to rescind the oligarchy in favor of their beloved democracy.⁵² Nevertheless, the garrison remained in place and the level of freedom the people retained in directing the *polis* was limited.

Cassander, another of the *diadochoi*, then took control of the region and placed Demetrius of Phaleron in charge of Athens.⁵³ Demetrius ruled as an autocratic philosopher-king, and introduced a reform movement based largely upon the teachings of the Peripatetic school.⁵⁴ Although his reforms included strict property restrictions for civic participation, he described his actions as strengthening the “democracy”; apparently the term, which had recently implied a dynamic government of actively involved citizens, was a mere buzz-word.⁵⁵ Despite the lack of freedom he afforded his subjects, it seems that Demetrius did in fact provide them with security and economic stability, and the people honored him with statues in the city,⁵⁶ recalling the popular tyrant of Athens Peisistratus.

Another Demetrius, this one the son of Alexander’s general Antigonus the One Eyed, landed in Greece in 307. He claimed to challenge the “tyranny” of Demetrius of Phaleron, vowing to liberate Athens, and the philosopher-king ran. The name of democracy was restored, and Demetrius was a hero to the Athenians, who erected a statue of both Antigonus and his son next to the images of the tyrannicides Harmodius and Aristogeiton.⁵⁷ He indeed allowed a fair amount of autonomy to Athens, although the

⁵² Mossé, 102.

⁵³ Kralli, 117.

⁵⁴ Mossé, 104-107.

⁵⁵ Larsen, 9.

⁵⁶ Mossé, 100.

⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the “liberation” of Athens resulted in Antigonus and Demetrius crowned the first “Kings” of the Macedonian world since Alexander. Pomeroy, 299.

monarch certainly asserted his authority.⁵⁸ Those wary of the demagogue, as well as those who still strove for Athenian independence and saw the seemingly benevolent authority of Demetrius as a path toward such, mark the political atmosphere of this time.⁵⁹ Several decades later, the Chremonidean War broke out against the rule of Demetrius' son, Antigonus Gonatas. This was “the final upsurge of nationalism” in Athens, led by men fighting for the old traditions and their *patrios politeia*.⁶⁰ The Athenians held out for two years, but eventually capitulated and accepted the Macedonian dominion.

The Hellenistic period saw an increase in “democracies” throughout the Greek world, but in this time of constant conquest and changing kingdoms, the term often meant little more than a city-state free from its own tyrant.⁶¹ Gone were the vibrant assemblies relying on popular sovereignty, and in its place was ultimate authoritarian control by a foreign king, always present and a constant limit on the actions of the *polis*. The *diadochoi* established hereditary monarchies in their territories, which relied somewhat on the loyalty of the subjects won by benefactions,⁶² but of course were never accountable to them in their governance.

Rome

While the Macedonian kings were still battling over the lands of Alexander, another power was rising in the West. The Latin peoples of Rome threw off their last monarch in favor of aristocratic rule around the same time of Cleisthenes' reforms. As Pericles was

⁵⁸ Mossé, 108.

⁵⁹ Mossé, 110-111.

⁶⁰ Mossé, 126-127.

⁶¹ Pomeroy, 303.

⁶² Bringmann, 19.

leading Athens against Sparta, Rome was beginning to expand from a city-state to a military power in Italy. In the following time in which Athenian democracy began its decline, the Roman Republic would begin to force its *imperium* upon the Mediterranean, eventually arriving in Greece.

The Republic traditionally dates from the overthrow in 510/509 of Tarquinius Superbus, the last of the Roman kings, to the crowning of Augustus Caesar as emperor in 27 B.C. Although authors throughout the Republic considered the kings as having generally benefited the state, a strain of anti-monarchism takes root and develops, especially in the later periods.⁶³ As legend holds, Superbus and his family were excessively licentious to such an extent that his son raped the wife of a relative nobleman. A band of aristocrats, led by Tarquinius Collatinus, the husband of the wronged woman, and his friend Junius Brutus, colluded to exile the monarch and his family. The men who drove the expulsion were praised as liberators and elected the first co-consuls of the government which was deemed a *res publica* (in contrast to the *res privatae* of the individual households).⁶⁴ In the mythology that developed around the founding of the Republic, Tarquinius Superbus seized the Roman monarchy as a tyrant in the Greek model,⁶⁵ whose popular projects could not save him from his shameful acts.

This new polity, dominated by strong consuls and the Senate, was designed by the elite in such a way that their individual holdings and power would remain secure, but offices were shared (relatively equally) among a number of families and restrained by a strict system of laws. The arms-bearing men as a whole were represented in the *comitia*

⁶³ Erskine (1991) concludes that the animosity Romans held for kings was influenced mainly by their interactions with Hellenistic kings during the third and second centuries.

⁶⁴ Ward et al., 51.

⁶⁵ Erskine, 110.

centuriata, which was the lesser of the branches of government and relied upon the consuls for authority. While the Republic was oligarchic, not democratic, in form, the aristocracy acted “with at least minimal concern for the lower ranks.”⁶⁶

Before long, however, the *plebs* began to assume a unified character with interests separate from the ruling patrician elite. Since they had no legal approach to redress their grievances, they would stage popular demonstrations, mainly refusing to serve in Rome’s many wars, to effect change. Eventually popular activists secured the Roman people’s greatest tool: the office of the *tribunus plebis*, whose primary goal was to promote the rights of the *plebs* and became a powerful office to which many plebeians aspired.⁶⁷ Despite the great advantages the Romans won for themselves, they never acquired the political liberties enjoyed by the Athenian democracy, with which Rome shared an intimate history.

Although commerce began early between the two city-states and Greek culture influenced much of the Roman way of life, Rome did not become greatly involved in Athenian affairs for several centuries. During the crisis that came to be called the Second Macedonian War, Philip V of Macedon invaded Attica in 200, and the Athenians appealed to powerful Rome. The Romans came with military support and they successfully drove back the Macedonian forces. In the wake of the war, Rome declared Greece free, yet gave Athens into the control of those aristocratic citizens who had supported an active stance alongside Rome during hostilities.⁶⁸ Once again, Athens suffered the loss of national control to a foreign power, except the Romans allowed the

⁶⁶ Ward et al., 50.

⁶⁷ One thinks first of Clodius, a patrician who adopted himself into a plebeian family just in order to run for the office in the first century B.C.

⁶⁸ Mossé, 140-141.

city to retain a democratic framework, in name at least. Following this war, Athens was one of the most reliable allies of Rome, and reaped the benefits that favored status sows while retaining ostensible independence in domestic matters.

Nevertheless, the spirit of true freedom, frustrated by so many years of foreign rule, was not dead yet. The beginning of the first century B.C. found the king of Pontus, Mithridates, challenging Roman dominance in the Near East and finding himself a hero to the champions of Greek freedom.⁶⁹ Around 89, when an Athenian delegate returning from Pontus brought news of Mithridates' approach and heralded a new Athenian independence, a popular uprising took place that expelled the oligarchic rulers.⁷⁰ Unfortunately for those who hoped for the return of real democracy, Mithridates failed to arrive and overturn Roman rule. Sulla's brutality was the reward for the liberation movement, and the devastation was so great that "[t]here was . . . no counting of the slain, but their numbers are to this day determined only by the space that was covered by blood . . . many say that it flowed through the gate and deluged the suburb."⁷¹ It took this final, drastic lesson, but finally Athens forsook the dream of regaining the freedom to administer her democratic government that had made her ancestors so great. It would be nearly two millennia until Greece would again be free.

The Romans had a peculiar view of Athenians and their government. On the one hand, they could not help but hold a deep respect for the culture and prestige of the classical age of Athens, and also the strength amassed by the former imperial power. Nevertheless, they were nearly unanimous in their attitudes against democracy.⁷² The

⁶⁹ Mossé, 148.

⁷⁰ Mossé, 148.

⁷¹ Plutarch, *Life of Sulla*, 14.

⁷² Roberts, ch. 5.

writings of Cicero considered classical Athens in two main modes: Athens as the origin of the cultural arts, and Athens as the home of ungrateful citizens and unruly, democratic mob-rule.⁷³ The Romans considered the popular government of Pericles and Demosthenes closer to licentious decadence than true liberty, a tradition that would prove to continue.

Although Rome established a thriving republic based upon the sovereignty of citizens, their government was always dominated by the aristocracy and was not capable of handling extensive democratic reforms.⁷⁴ Theirs was a society of hierarchy where subjugation was not questioned,⁷⁵ and their government one of privileged aristocrats, and it had been so since at least the expulsion of the kings. The Republic and, to some extent, the Empire debated some progressive reforms, during periods of crisis.⁷⁶ However, Roman democracy did not have a chance to take root in the tradition-bound state, and instead it bred military generals whose political power grew from their troops and the displeased commoners. The weakened state and the ancient Senate were no match for Julius Caesar's charismatic rule over the people, and the Republic fell to the rule of a military dictator.

⁷³ Roberts, 100-104.

⁷⁴ The collapse of the Republic can be seen as the consequence of growing demands of *populares* for political power from an aristocracy too devoted to its traditional institutions.

⁷⁵ Ward et al., 35.

⁷⁶ Larsen, 10 ff.

Chapter III: America

The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind.

– Thomas Paine

Modern political theorists since Machiavelli and Hobbes demonstrate the need for civic mindedness and active participation for the health of the state, but democracy as a viable choice of government was not accepted so easily. Rather, the mixed constitution was common through the nineteenth century, based on joining the three basic types of government, monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy.⁷⁷ Indeed, it was in this climate of mixed regimes, similar to constitutional aristocracies of the ancient world, that the colonial Americans crafted their own government; their own democratic popular assemblies were only effective as far as they presented a slight check to one or more other branches of government.⁷⁸

An important thing to note is the thoroughly modern spirit of the revolutionary times. Although both nations shared enthusiasm for freedom and recognition of legal (if not necessarily natural) equality of citizens, there is little direct influence from the Athenians upon the American Founders. Classical education was prevalent among the education of the revolutionary generation, and the culture that founded the United States was inherited from the traditions of all Western history.⁷⁹ Accordingly, the theories and

⁷⁷ Taking Great Britain as an example of a constitutional republic, the monarchy is found in the Crown, the aristocracy in the House of Lords, and the democracy in the House of Commons. Over Britain's history, power has shifted from the King to Parliament and back again, but power has never been ceded to the House of Commons (even the experiment in a Commonwealth ended in a sort of dictatorship).

⁷⁸ Lokken, 577.

⁷⁹ Kopff, 43 ff.

rhetoric of the time were mostly framed in the concepts and vocabulary of classical authors from Homer to Justinian, although it is not entirely clear to what extent the Framers adhered to the ancient's thoughts, and to what extent they were merely erudite "window dressing" for arguments.⁸⁰

Leading up to the American Revolution, representation was more appealing than direct democratic rule by most parties in political debates, recalling the ancient philosopher's aversion for mob rule. Thomas Paine, arguably one of the most radical of the Revolutionary generation, would not claim to seek pure democracy: "By ingrafting representation upon democracy, we arrive at a system of government capable of embracing and confederating all the various interests and every extent of territory and population."⁸¹ The War for Independence did not occur to bring about an American democracy, *per se*; the American people, defined by the founders and liberated by the Revolution, saw the new government as a representative republic. Because this new government and this new nation were based largely on the principles of freedom and equality, further democratic practice was easily accepted when introduced.

In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine discriminates between society and government, and determines that while the former is beneficial and always welcomed, the latter is, at best, unavoidable. Paine exhibits his rhetorical prowess by comparing government to clothing, a "badge of lost innocence." Therefore, whatever system most efficiently and non-intrusively safeguards security – the "true design and end" of government – is the best. This minimalist view of politics is common in classical liberalism, and stands in stark contrast to the active and nearly all-encompassing aspects of citizenship endorsed

⁸⁰ Bailyn, 15.

⁸¹ Paine, *Common Sense*, quoted in Lokken (1959) p. 573.

by the Athenians. It instead encouraged a representative government wherein governing power is actually removed from the people through elected bodies, but governance is always accountable to the people.

The primary purpose of *Common Sense* was to rally Americans behind the side of independence. It succeeded in thoroughly shattering the concept of the divine or hereditary right of monarchical rule. Paine set his sights on traditional thoughts of power and aimed to sway his adopted compatriots away from the lures of royalty and aristocracy. Like Solon, he was wary about the long-standing influence of the aristocracy, and blamed them above all for the injustices that the Americans suffered.⁸² Therefore, when the time came for the colonies to renounce their ties to Britain and form a new government, it is no surprise that Paine stepped forward as a champion for a new democratic republic that would hold popular sovereignty and rule of law above all. Paine looked to novel ideas of governance instead of relying on old models that may have been successful, since he was a product of the future-minded optimism of Enlightenment, and “viewed the past as an almost unbroken reign of ignorance, superstition, and terror.”⁸³

To achieve this targeted polity, *Common Sense* proposes several specific suggestions, including “unicameral state legislatures; . . . a national legislature; frequent elections; and a written constitution securing individual rights.”⁸⁴ While much of what he said was scandalously radical to conservative contemporaries accustomed to the *status quo*, we know from the direction the nation took that his beliefs impressed the course of the Revolution and the nation it founded. Rejecting the need for mixed government (and monarchy in particular) as an antiquated idea, Paine says that all of mankind’s progress is

⁸² Wilentz, 23.

⁸³ Strauss, 680.

⁸⁴ Wilentz, 24.

deemed insignificant, if “they must go two or three thousand years back for lessons and examples”⁸⁵ of monarchy and aristocracy. In his novel and influential view, popular republicanism would work just fine.

Perhaps no other work was as widely distributed, read, and debated in the months leading up to the Declaration of Independence, and many of our founding fathers took up Paine’s call for absolution from Britain, and, more importantly, the tyranny of Britain’s crown. Somewhat more tempered than Paine, Thomas Jefferson looked favorably on the ideas put forth in *Common Sense* and agreed with much of the pamphlet. Jefferson is hailed throughout history as one of the essential thinkers of American politics for his ideal of an agrarian republic that allowed maximal liberty to a well-principled citizenry. He was a true student of the Enlightenment and had taken to heart the importance of self-direction reliant upon reason, and nothing is more unreasonable than for a man born free to live in servitude to a distant king.

Jefferson composed the most important document in the history of America in the summer of 1776, in response to a growing feeling of unease with British control and an intensifying call for a permanent split. These sentiments resulted in a resolution on June 7, submitted to the Continental Congress by Richard Henry Lee for debate (and assumed acceptance), proclaiming:

That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States, that they are absolved of all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, dissolved.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Quoted in Aldridge, A. Owen. 1968. “Thomas Paine and the Classics.” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*. 1, 4: 370-380. p. 376.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Cunningham, 46.

Debate was delayed, but as passage was inevitable, a committee of the foremost minds was formed to direct the drafting of its proclamation. This group put on Thomas Jefferson the task of explaining to the world the causes and rationale of America's revolutionary actions. Jefferson was known for his oratorical writing style that had won several important cases for him as a young lawyer, and was well respected by most everyone.⁸⁷ The committee presented the *Declaration of Independence* to the Congress on June 28, and it was adopted on July 4, with Lee's original proposal contained within.

Much has been said on the sources from which Jefferson drew when drafting the statement,⁸⁸ but the traditional argument highlights the similarities between the language and theory of the *Declaration* and the writings of John Locke, especially the *Second Treatise on Government*. Jefferson had purchased this book along with other liberal political works early in his career,⁸⁹ and they seem to have been quite influential throughout his career. When he claims that he imported from "neither book nor pamphlet" in crafting the work, we can believe him; although there are definite Lockean inspirations found in the *Declaration*, it is too eclectic and vague to classify it under very precise terms. It can be said, despite revisions by committee and Congress, that we can still appreciate the work as a construction of Jefferson, as they amended very little of substance.⁹⁰ We should also note that while Jefferson was eventually recognized as the author of the groundbreaking publication, he did not intend it to be an essay of one man's beliefs, but rather "it was intended to be an expression of the American mind."⁹¹

⁸⁷ Cunningham, 46.

⁸⁸ Cunningham, 48.

⁸⁹ Cunningham, 16.

⁹⁰ Cunningham, 48.

⁹¹ Zuckert, 205.

We can study the brief work, especially the opening paragraphs and the concluding remarks and discover a distinct frame of mind in Jefferson's concise words. Again, the *Declaration* is a defense of America's trek toward independence, and Jefferson chooses the familiar language of natural right to demonstrate his people's moral cause. First among the "self-evident" truths that encouraged the Americans is "that all Men are created equal" and that their Creator instills them with certain unalienable Rights, "including Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."⁹² The framers would construct our government upon this foundation. The language of rights reflects the freedom recognized as inherent to colonial Americans, as well as men everywhere; although they still suffered under a distant crown, they sensed a brighter future ahead through sacrifice and constant, insatiable progress.

By examining these truths more closely, we detect two major aspects of humanity: 1) Every human is, by birth, no more or less suitable to govern others. This negates any idea of hereditary or divine right to rule.⁹³ 2) On account of this natural equality, each person is bestowed natural, subjective rights that ought not to be violated by others.⁹⁴ It follows then that inasmuch as government is established by and between citizens to secure these priceless rights (the only noble end of political activity), the citizens hold the right to dissolve failed political bonds and reconstruct stronger ones. This right of revolution is perhaps one of the most influential theories found in Locke's work.⁹⁵

⁹² Compare this and other passages from the *Declaration of Independence* with the *Virginia Declaration of Rights* (May 1776) by George Mason, which was surely an influence on Jefferson's own writing.

⁹³ Zuckert, 212-213.

⁹⁴ Zuckert, 216-218, 220-224.

⁹⁵ Wishy, 418; Zuckert, 229.

Here we see the two basic requirements for democracy: a free people who recognize the benefits of freedom and equality of the citizenry before the law – the same bases of the Athenian democracy. We must remember that the *Declaration* is an informal statement of position, asserting widely held beliefs circulating among the American people. As such, this perhaps more than any other document demarcates the attributes and associations of the first generation of Americans, as well as provides our politics with common ground, a higher authority to which we may appeal our grievances. Many see the *Declaration* as the moral resolution of the United States, while other documents and institutions, namely the Constitution, merely establish rules for fulfilling the ideals of 1776, which Thomas Jefferson so finely stated.

The Constitution of the United States implements the lofty goals of the Declaration, to “secure these rights” that Nature and her God has granted each of us. This document can be seen as the muscles and sinews that allow the skeleton of liberal beliefs to come to life. Not since classical Athens had a government given so much power to the citizenry (though restricted, as it was, to propertied whites), trusting in their ability to place power in the hands of the able.⁹⁶ Though “democracy” is written nowhere in either the Declaration or Constitution, it is clear that the founders meant to establish a popular republic without the rule of an elite minority. The Constitution, especially the Bill of Rights, demands that its citizens be afforded every right, social and political, inherent to a rational being.

⁹⁶ Thomas Jefferson in a letter to John Adams, October 28, 1813: “That form of government is best which provides the most effectually for a pure selection of [the] natural *aristoi* into offices of the government.” Nevertheless, the new democracy was designed with systematic checks, such as the electoral college, assuming that in some cases the people would be unable to choose wisely.

Where the Declaration is a political thesis written in largely philosophic terms, the Constitution is the work of legislators and lawyers. The *Federalist Papers* may help us to understand better the intentions of the founders in designing our nation's charter. In perhaps the most well read of these essays, *Federalist 10*, James Madison describes one of the great criticisms of democracy of all eras: the civil infighting and instability that comes with striving factions of citizens. In it, Madison states, "The friend of popular governments, never finds himself so much alarmed for their character and fate, as when he contemplates their propensity" to break down into "factions."⁹⁷ This is most prevalent in democracy, because it demands a large variety of people to assert their voice.

In defending the need for a strong central Union to serve and protect the people, replacing the largely anarchic Confederation, Madison hit on a fundamental quality of democracy, and, indeed, good governance in general. Recall that Athenians like Solon patriotically recognized their *polis* as particularly significant, but also that civil strife, mainly between the opposing economic classes, was an impediment to greater destinies. Just as the reforming poet set out to construct a state with minimal conflict among its citizens, the Founders hoped that their own constitution could "insure domestic tranquility" and "secure the blessings of Liberty to [themselves] and [their] Posterity."⁹⁸ However, where the Athenians hoped to resolve conflict by drawing on the entire citizenry, to prevent any individual from seizing tyrannical control, the Americans had another approach. They believed in maximizing the potentials of all and allowing the citizens to work with and against each other, encouraging the best out of every individual. A limited republican government, modeled somewhat on the conservative institutions of

⁹⁷ These factions are termed "special interests" in today's political vocabulary.

⁹⁸ *Constitution of the United States of America*, preamble.

Rome but with the spirit of popular sovereignty connected with Athens, would be sufficient to secure the qualities of a good polity and citizenry.

We find in the time of the American Revolution a people ready and willing to cast off the burden of oppressive colonial rule and break away on an experiment of republican politics, governed by an overarching belief in the freedom and importance of the individual. Like the “founders” of Athenian democracy, who themselves were esteemed noblemen, the revolutionary Americans were skeptical at first about giving power to the hands of the masses. Therefore, both the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution of the United States employ a representative republic with power distanced from, but eventually reliant upon the people, who hold irrevocable rights from God and the state. The following century would find philosophers again interested in certain forgotten histories and theories, and the ancient ideals of true democracy would again be celebrated, and their popularity would flourish in Western politics once more.

My thesis had an aim to study democratic institutions of the ancient world, specifically in Athens, in order to compare them with the democratic government founded in America. The Athenian experience reveals novel ideas used to solve the crises of the Greeks' burgeoning political system, and are not unlike the ideas that fostered the American Revolution. From Solon, the famed lawgiver, to later democratic reformers such as Cleisthenes and Pericles, the Athenians emphasized the individual's place in political participation. The Athenians, as far as is known, did not recognize their government as *demokratia* until sometime into the fifth century. Earlier accounts used the terms *eunomia*, "good laws," or *isonomia*, "equality before the law," but it is clear that from the start, legislators looked to the people to decide the nation's course. Though the majority of their peers did not agree, and their political opposition was significant, democrats fought to secure the blessings of their freedoms and created a legacy of popular government that continues today. American democracy, to be sure, differs from the Athenians' in many aspects of influence and practice, but relies on a similar belief in the freedom and equality of the citizens.

In the earliest ages of Athens, an aristocracy replaced a monarchy. Later, class tensions led reformers to lessen the disparities and bring the lower classes into the political process in hopes of alleviating some of the turmoil. Little did they know, they had begun a progression that would lead to the first large-scale political community to eschew the traditional powers of the king or nobility. To do so, the ability to enact national decisions was given to the nation as a whole. Thus political democracy, literally, "people-power," was born. Athens employed a direct democracy, so the functions of the state were performed by all the male citizenry, gathered in the capital's assembly halls

and courtrooms. While the democratic regime in Athens faced constant threats from rival oligarchic factions and external enemies, it survived to impress both the ancient and modern worlds with an image of equal laws and freedoms for all.

The downfall of Athenian democracy is perhaps its greatest legacy. Indeed, the most celebrated and studied minds of the classical age, in which democracy flourished, were opposed to the democratic regime of their city, citing its inefficiency and excesses. When Athens' realm of influence expanded and it gained an empire, an unprecedented degree of luxury settled on the nation. As a result, constant distractions disintegrated the actively concerned citizenry, which formed the basis of the dynamic and successful democracy. Years of war and mounting dissolution of once-successful democratic traditions bred a state that was altogether unprepared for such crises that lay in store. Early democratic lawgivers worked precisely against economic disparities in politics, but it seems that the imperial practices worked against this. The nationalist power of an independent democratic *polis* that was brave enough to hold off the Persian Empire had waned to factious strife and rhetorical flair, and Athens was soon conquered.

The Hellenistic age reveals little democratic politics in Athens, after the city-state was taken over and ruled by successive Macedonian kings who restricted the autonomy that Athenians had so cherished. The citizens no longer felt they together held control of their government, but the democratic spirit and the struggle for independence refused to die; more than two centuries after being defeated by Philip, Rome had to quell yet another popular insurrection. Even in the age of Republican Rome, who "liberated" Athens from Macedonian rule, the *polis* retained only ostensible freedom. For the

omnipresence of Rome was persistent, and the Athenians, though mournful of their state's lost liberty, seemed to know their place in the new world.

Whereas Athens and other ancient states considered liberty to be a specific function of the constitution or society, a modern philosophy based solely upon freedom inspired later governments. One of the greatest innovation of the Athenians and other Greeks is the import given to the individual human and his choices, but they never comprehended that liberty could precede or mold politics. The influence of Locke and other Enlightenment liberals created a school of thought that would be accepted and actualized in the American Revolution, and in later phases of democratic reform. America's founding ideals are similar to Athens' in their novelty and surprising success, but the language of the modern notion of independence is based on natural rights, a concept altogether unrecognized by the Greeks.⁹⁹ Valuing this sense of political and individual liberty, the young nation severed ties with its monarch and began to rule itself, instituting a government based on the ideals expressed in the *Declaration of Independence*.

The founding Americans in part distanced themselves from the Athenian legacy by rejecting their populist style of government. In their minds, direct democracy was rule by an unwieldy mob and the "virtual" representation of the congress was sufficient. They employed a representative republic with limited citizen influence, but stated the sovereignty would lie with the people, guaranteeing America's democratic future. Many Founding Fathers were aristocrats themselves (as Solon and many other Athenian

⁹⁹ Benjamin Constant to the French National Assembly in 1819 on modern liberty: "The condition of the human race in antiquity did not allow for the introduction or establishment of an institution of this nature. The ancient peoples could neither feel the need for it, nor appreciate its advantages. Their social organization led them to desire an entirely different freedom from the one which this system grants to us."

populists) which might explain the more conservative republicanism of early America. Nevertheless, in 1776, the first democracy since the ancient world was established, and it has persevered.

Though we know little about what actually took place in the early Athenian democracy, we can find lines of congruency between it and America from the record. We have seen that Athens, like our own nation, was founded by unconventional thinkers who placed unprecedented power in the hands of the people. Moreover, as we have seen in Athens, the democratic institutions expand over their course with more egalitarian practices, such as the chance lottery and limiting traditional power of the aristocratic Council. This is mirrored in America, where greater equality in suffrage and rights has been earned, slowly, since the inception.

Unlike the ancient people, however, America sprung from teachings of natural right, and this, combined with financial and technological success, has unfortunately led to a precarious feeling of entitlement. Apathy toward threats and, more fundamentally, apathy toward obligations led to the downfall of the Athenian democracy in the ancient world. Perhaps if its citizens were still disciplined with the might that defeated the Persian invaders, Philip would never have stood a chance. We must constantly be wary of democracy's ability to overcome striving internal factions in the face of a threat. The sense of right and freedom is still strong, and the inherited hatred of kings is a constant tool against the resumption of tyranny in America.¹⁰⁰ Yet in this present time of luxury and convenience and real threat, we must remain vigilant to protect the liberties passed

¹⁰⁰ Abraham Lincoln, 1864: "Our reliance is in the love of liberty which God has planted in our bosoms. Our defense is in the preservation of the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all men, in all lands, everywhere. Destroy this spirit, and you have planted the seeds of despotism at your own door."

down to us. Besides our liberal beliefs, we have of course the example of the Athenians to show us how to prosper and how to perish.

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