



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

[fff@fff.org](mailto:fff@fff.org) [www.fff.org](http://www.fff.org)

## **Democracy Versus Freedom**

**by Jarret B. Wollstein**

*Democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and conflict; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths.*

— James Madison, fourth president of the United States  
and primary Framers of the U.S. Constitution

Politicians and major media constantly tell us that oppressed peoples crave “democracy,” and that only a democratic world will be free and peaceful. Now President Bush has launched a campaign to bring “freedom and democracy” to the world.

But are freedom and democracy the same thing? And will democracy imposed by force guarantee peace?

### **Democracy, collectivism, and individualism**

Consider the meanings of three key political concepts:

1. Democracy: that form of government in which sovereign power resides in the people as a whole, and is exercised either directly by them or by officers elected by them.
2. Collectivism: a politico-economic system in which the means of production and the distribution of goods and services are controlled by the collective, that is, the society or state considered as a group — e.g., Nazi Germany and Communist China.
3. Individualism: the social theory which advocates the free and independent action of the individual person, as opposed to collectivist methods of organization and state interference.

In fact, democracy is much closer to collectivism than it is to individualism. Like collectivism, democracy places essential political power with the group, rather than with the individual person — thus making everyone’s freedom subject to the passions of the mob or those with the most power.

## **What is democracy?**

Throughout the world, democracy is as often a cover for tyranny as it is a protection for liberty. Many countries call themselves “democracies” and have regular elections, yet systematically oppress their own people.

For example, Stalinist North Korea calls itself “the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea” and communist China calls itself the “People’s Republic of China.” Like the old Soviet Union, they have regular elections, elected legislatures, and even some choice of candidates.

However, it’s all a fraud. Voting is mandatory. The only party allowed to run candidates is the Communist Party. Legislatures rubber-stamp the decrees of party bosses. And anyone who objects strongly or tries to set up another party ends up dead or in a slave labor camp.

Many countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America also now have multi-party democracies — but little freedom. Vote fraud is massive, opposition candidates are often beaten or murdered by government thugs, and a small elite controls all power. Citizens have little freedom, but lots of poverty.

What of Western democracies? Things are better, but far from free of corruption, fraud, and manipulation of voters.

Even in the United States, more and more people report their votes are not being counted. Electronic voting makes fraud easy (and nearly undetectable). Congressional districts are gerrymandered to guarantee that one party always wins. Third parties, such as the Libertarians and Greens, face virtually insurmountable obstacles, including oppressive ballot-access and campaign-finance laws. Only Republicans and Democrats are allowed in most televised political debates. And third-party election results are often not even reported by the media.

Whatever its virtues, democracy is not freedom. As the 19th-century French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville warned in his classic *Democracy in America*, a democracy can be just as tyrannical as a dictatorship once the voters decide to vote themselves money from the treasury.

Democracy is a method of deciding who shall rule. It does not determine the morality of the resulting government. At best, democracy means that government has popular support. But popular support is no guarantee that government will protect your freedom.

In a democracy, if most voters support freedom of speech, press, religion, association, and enterprise, their elected government will probably respect such freedoms.

But if voters prefer that governments impose a welfare state and confiscatory taxes, ban unapproved drugs, impose censorship, imprison critics, seize the property of unpopular groups, torture prisoners, and draft the young, a democratic government will probably grant those wishes also.

## **Conceived in liberty, not in democracy**

America's Founders were well aware of the evils of pure democracy and wisely made the United States a limited constitutional republic in which individual rights were strongly protected.

The word "democracy" does not appear either in the Declaration of Independence or in the U.S. Constitution. Instead, Article IV, Section 4 of the Constitution guarantees "to every State in this Union a Republican Form of Government."

The difference between a constitutional republic and a democracy is the difference between liberty and slavery. As Ira Glasser, former director of the American Civil Liberties Union, explains,

Even in a democracy the majority must be limited in order to guarantee individual rights and personal autonomy.

If whites have more votes than blacks, they cannot be allowed to deny blacks their constitutional rights. If men have more political power than women, that cannot permit them to deny women certain individual rights. Winning an election should not permit the victors to assemble their votes and enact laws or govern in a way that strips those who lose of their liberty.

## **Electoral versus substantive rights**

To understand why democracy does not guarantee freedom, it is essential to distinguish between electoral and substantive rights.

Electoral rights define your ability to participate in the election of some government officials.

Electoral rights give you some say in who governs. They do not guarantee that elected officials will respect your freedom.

Substantive rights are the ability to control your own life and property. They are the core elements of freedom.

Your substantive rights include your: (1) right to life, liberty, and property; (2) freedom of speech and press; (3) right to trial by jury; (4) freedom to travel; (5) freedom of religion; (6) freedom to educate your children as you see fit; (7) right to own and run your own business; (8) right to defend yourself, including the right to own guns; and (9) right not to be spied on by government.

The Declaration of Independence expresses this vision well:

We hold these Truths to be self-evident; that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness....

## **Democracy is no guarantee of peace**

Just as democracy is no guarantee of freedom, neither is it a guarantee of peace.

It is true that the relatively free democratic states are less likely to fight each other.

But democratically elected regimes frequently attack weak nondemocracies.

As Ivan Eland explains in *The Empire Has No Clothes*, “The three greatest imperial powers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries — France, Great Britain, and the United States — were democracies.”

Indeed, in the 20th century, the United States attacked more countries than any other nation. Since the end of World War II, the United States has engaged in more than 200 armed conflicts, killing hundreds of thousands of civilians — waging wars or military actions in Korea, Vietnam, Panama, Grenada, Colombia, Haiti, Iraq, Afghanistan, Serbia, and Bosnia. In nearly all of these conflicts, there was no threat to the United States.

It is clear from the history of Britain, France, Germany, and the United States, that democracy is no guarantee of peace.

## **Is democracy necessary for freedom?**

While democracy doesn't guarantee either freedom or peace, there are many historical examples of societies that didn't have either elections or legislatures, but in which people's rights were strongly protected.

Examples include the American colonies before the Revolutionary War ... the American West in the 19th century, where violence was one-tenth of what it is in large U.S. cities today ... many cantons in Switzerland today, which have little government ... and the nations of Andorra and Monaco.

In fact, for centuries much of the world had law and order without legislatures or elected rulers. Instead they had what might be called “free-market justice” provided by traveling judges adjudicating disputes, with decisions enforced by local communities and sheriffs.

This nonelectoral legal system (explained in the book, *The Enterprise of Law*, by Bruce L. Benson) created what is today known as “the common law” — thousands of collected decisions that provide the basis for law in America, Europe, and much of the free world.

## **The path to freedom and peace**

Throughout the world, thugs and despots — some democratically elected, and some not — solemnly give lip-service to “democracy” and “freedom,” while doing everything in their power to destroy them.

To have a free and peaceful world, we must create societies in which the inalienable rights of the individual person are again respected, and the powers of government are strictly limited.

That means ending confiscation of property without trial, secret arrests, imprisonment without conviction, and torture of prisoners. It means abolishing sovereign-immunity laws, which exempt government agents from legal responsibility when they kidnap, steal, torture, or murder.

It means creating truly independent citizens' grand juries with the power to investigate and indict corrupt government officials and police.

And it means ceasing government spying on its own citizens and ending foreign invasions to impose "democracy" by force.

No, democracy is not the same as liberty. All too often, building "democracy" has been used as a justification for destroying freedom.

To achieve a free and peaceful world, we must restore freedom and individual liberty, not democracy.

*Jarret Wollstein is a director at [The International Society for Individual Liberty](#) and co-founder of the original Society for Individual Liberty in 1969. He is the author of 28 books and special reports, including **Surviving Terrorism** and **Shadow Over the Land: The Government's War On Your Liberty**.*

**This article was originally published in the January 2006 edition of *Freedom Daily*.**