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Subject: Followup: What Is a Republic?

Posted by [elektratic](#) on Thu, 15 Jun 2006 20:10:30 GMT

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"The very word [republic] inspired confusion, such that John Adams, perhaps the country's most learned student of politics, complained that he 'never understood' what a republican government was and believed 'no man ever did or ever will.' Compounded from the latin res publica, 'republic' meant 'the public good, or the good of the whole,' as Thomas Paine explained, 'in contradistinction to the despotic form, which makes the good of the sovereign, or of one man, the only object of government.' Technically, then, even England's eighteenth-century constitution could have qualified as 'republican' -- had it worked in fact as it did in theory, restraining the power of King, nobles, and people, so that the public welfare triumphed over particular interests."But for Americans and Englishmen of the eighteenth century republicanism was also associated with the Commonwealth period of British history, when for a brief time England was ruled without King or lords; and indeed 'commonwealth' is the closest English equivalent to 'republic.' 'Republic,' then, had concrete institutional implications: it suggested a state in which all power flowed from the people, none from inherited title . . . The Americans' later conversion to republicanism represented, then, more than a reaffirmation of traditional conceptions of the corporate free state, in which all private interests must be sacrificed for the common good. It meant that the people alone would allocate power. It meant that the United States would have neither legally established nobility nor King."Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776*, pp. 287-288.

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