The Dizziness of Choice

Freedom is a universal craving. The right to determine one's own destiny is perhaps one of the few that most rational adults can agree on. Yet quite how this right manifests itself is complex even on an individual scale, and becomes all the more elaborate when it extends to the collective. To the country, the nation. In 1787, as well as throughout his career, this complication was not lost on Benjamin Franklin. In fact, he was perhaps as qualified as one could be at the time to understand that the maintenance of the United States of America as a republic was no simple endeavour. On the contrary, it was to be a continuous labour on the part of all those who wished to see it thrive, as well as those scheming towards its fall. The reasons for this are many, but can be summarised helpfully if one chooses to momentarily decentre the political lens from the republic-monarchy dichotomy, and instead focus on its moral, social and philosophical implications. This is to say that the trouble and challenge of a republic is explained best in understanding the dizziness of choice.

Republic and monarchy are not the only two ways for a country to operate, but during Franklin's time the distinction between the two was paramount in understanding a nation's vision. For the USA, later regarded as 'The Land of the Free' from Francis Scott Key's seminal poem, the ideals of a republic were what Franklin and his fellow Founding Fathers intended to uphold. Emphasis on the 'intended', here. On first glance, the logic to opt in this direction is perfectly sensical: the republic prioritises the power of the people, who can (hopefully) have their say in electing a head of state, rather than relying on a monarchy's hereditary ruler to be best equipped for the job. However, in choosing to choose a nation's leader, a great weight is automatically placed on the shoulders of those with the power to elect; they are expected to continually engage with their country's politics, economy and safety status in order to decide whose leadership will be the most beneficial. A republican structure, therefore, is not without its upkeep, whereas a monarchy simply happens to itself. No active engagement is required, as the process is a self-fulfilling cycle only relying on the continuing practice of life and death in the human race. As long as one ruler dies and another is born to take their place, the life cycle of the monarchy remains unthreatened. The republic, though, can boast no such security. It is active, and demanding, but purports to be a worthwhile cause. This is because expectations of the republic are rooted in related expectations that indeed *all* things worth doing require effort and determination, and that if something is challenging it is usually a positive force. Nothing good comes for free.

These views are not controversial, at least not at their outset, but it is the task of remaining dedicated to them which proves the greatest difficulty. Commitment to any task becomes more taxing as time goes by: the effort required may not have increased, but the individual's weariness has, and therefore their willingness and determination to persevere start to flag. What felt like a good and promising notion at the beginning can now seem exhausting. The maintenance of a republic epitomises this concept. At the start, US citizens were likely filled with hope and motivation for their future, but as the decades and centuries passed the weight of political determination sunk in, and the ideal of a republic does not feel quite as idealistic anymore. Still, this is not to imply that citizens will suddenly wish to abandon the formation altogether: fear and distrust of monarchy maintains its potency too. It is more to note that a republic, like many things, does not truly reveal itself until it has already been woven into a society's fabric. Until it is too late to be undone. This is evidenced most

famously in the fall of the Roman republic, which found itself overwhelmed with economic inequality, internal corruption and political violence, until the autocratic Roman Empire took its place.[1]Though most republics start with good intention, the greed of man has a tendency to overpower the desire for collective good, and dictatorship does not lurk too far away.

Whether or not a similar fate has befallen, or will befall, the United States is for the reader to decide. What is certain is that the labour of a republic is not just one of love, but of sacrifice, grit, and sometimes selfishness. At this point, it is pertinent to examine what exactly Franklin meant when stating that the US was a republic, 'if you can keep it'.[2] The difficulty of maintaining a republic has already been discussed here, but the question of who Franklin is referring to with that elusive 'you' is equally interesting to unfold. On the one hand, it is an address to the everyman: a reminder that each American citizen has a duty to uphold their republic and ensure its success. After all, it will not maintain itself. On the other hand, though, lies a slightly more sinister implication, if 'you' is to be interpreted as the American social and political elite. Across history, the collapse of republics has often been closely tied to a nation's most powerful people feeling resistant to share power with their peers, and instead favouring an oligarchic system that allows them to take control of history. The Roman Senate was dominated by aristocracy who often ignored the needs of the plebeian, and ancient Athens' democracy spiralled in cycles of elite domination.[3] Therefore, it is not only the responsibility of the lower and middle-class civilians to defend their republic, but it is also the responsibility of the 'one percent' to respect the division of power, rather than demanding it all for themselves.

Following this reasoning, there begs the question of whether the republic is such a beacon of free will after all. In popular understanding, its offering of a choice of leader is its main advantage over the monarchy, but if this choice is always framed between repeating cycles of political instability and infighting, it might not be quite so free. In other words, there are certain similarities that all republics have shared across history, and so the identification of such patterns, and assumption that they are to continue, puts a limit on how much any republic can be truly self-determining. To understand this better, it is useful to explore the philosophical theory of agent-causal compatibility; a notion that attempts to reconcile the concept of agent causation (the belief that individuals, rather than just external events, can effect change) with determinism. Ned Markosian is credited with establishing a compatibilist version of Thomas Reid's initial agent causation theory, which did not allow for compatibility with determinism, and proposing that the two could indeed co-exist. Though the theory is far more complex than this essay has room to analyse, the essential point for this piece is that 'your actions are free and that you are responsible for them, even though they are caused by events that occurred long before you were born'.[4] In terms of the members of a republic, this means that they do maintain freedom over who is to be elected head of state (as long as the

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[1] André Piganiol, 'THE CAUSES OF THE FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE', *The Journal of General Education*, *5*.1 (1950), pp. 62–69.
[2] National Park Service, 'September 17, 1787: A Republic, If You Can Keep It', *National Park Service*, 2023 <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/constitutionalconvention-september17.htm> [accessed 12/11/2025]
[3] Dick Dowdell, 'A Republic, If You Can Keep it!', *Medium,* 2025 < https://medium.com/the-political-prism/a-republic-if-you-can-keep-it-58410e5b8f47> [accessed 10/11/2025]
[4] Ned Markosian, 'Agent Causation as the Solution to All the Compatibilist's Problems', *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 157.3, (2012), pp. 383–98 (391).

republic is indeed still a republic, and of course not absolutely every civilian is always granted the right to vote) but the effects of an entire history of republics cannot be avoided. The cycles of politics and government that come before and after any individual's birth function alongside, not as opposed to, their freedom of determination.

To conclude, the choice that a republic offers and a monarchy denies is dizzying not just because of the gravity of the decision, and the long-lasting impact it can have on a country's future, but also because of the multiple planes on which the dizziness operates. There is dizziness in elite control, in proletarian rights, in economic power, in political sovereignty, and more factors too many to name. Though Benjamin Franklin died without knowing what his nation would become, his foresight regarding the challenges of a republic was certainly impressive. Choice is powerful and empowering, but can also be destructive and dangerous. The American people have a duty to preserve the freedom they have been afforded, and to remember if only one certainty: the republic is a job never quite complete.