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Democracy, republic: the question's the same

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By Charles R. Church

I don't believe that the United States is a democracy. My trusty old dictionary claims that a democracy exists where government is by the people, where the majority rules. If that's correct, as judged by our last presidential election, in which Hillary Clinton received more popular votes than Donald Trump, we are not a democracy at all.

Certainly, Benjamin Franklin didn't think so. On emerging from the Constitutional Convention in 1787 after the document had been signed, Franklin was asked by a woman: "What kind of government have you given us, Dr. Franklin?" His reply? "A republic, madam, if you can keep it." (I prefer the version with the woman rather than a crowd.)

Questions about our form of government aside, the wily old sage had a point that is alive and well as I write. Can our government survive, when nearly every day it gets torn apart as our president blares out whatever version of the truth might suit him at the moment?

As a trial lawyer, I have great respect for facts, since consequences are meted out based on what the facts are determined to be. Trials, in that way, stand as both a metaphor and a guide. How do we even attempt to reach a just result or a wise policy without first knowing the facts?

Today, that verity is turned on its head. Now, facts get to be facts, and truth becomes truth, simply when people in power claim them to be such. And real facts lose their stature as such when those same people pronounce them false.

That might not worry people so, were it not that great swaths of our populace appear to swallow what our Tweeter-in-Chief claims, even though the "factual" content of those tweets often is blatantly false and self-serving, and frequently contradicts something he tweeted the day before.

We may call President Trump a demagogue, that is, "a leader who makes use of popular prejudices and false claims in order to gain power" (my trusty dictionary again) — but as the definition makes clear, sometimes people believe demagogues.

As long as a demagogue remains in power, which can only happen where truth has flown out the window and stays there, then Franklin's implied question lingers. Whether you wish to call our nation a republic or a democracy, can we keep it?

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