

Economic Cycles and Political Trends in the United States (Part II)

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Global Research, April 05, 2008

5 April 2008

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#)

“I would rather be exposed to the inconveniences attending too much liberty than to those attending too small a degree of it.”

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), 3rd U.S. President

“The people are turbulent and changing, they seldom judge or determine right.”

Alexander Hamilton (1755-1804)

“I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute--where no Catholic prelate would tell the President (should he be Catholic) how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote-- where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference--and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the President who might appoint him or the people who might elect him.”

President John F. Kennedy, September 12, 1960

[N.B.: This article is drawn from a conference pronounced by Dr. Tremblay before the Florida Renaissance Academy, Marco Island Yacht Club, on April 4, 2008.]

PART II

There are even much longer political cycles and trends in political philosophies and ideologies, and social trends, some lasting more than 100 years. Thus, some people may live an entire life without encountering their more extreme occurrences. These are the very long trends I am dealing with here.

Indeed, historically, we can identify three major trends and sources of disagreement in American political philosophy. Such swings in political ideas are developed more fully in my book “[The New American Empire](#)” (a book which has also been published in French in [Canada](#) and in [France](#) and which has just been published in [Turkish](#), (in Ankara). I believe it is important to understand the sources of these trends and cycles in order to understand contemporary politics.

I- First, let’s go back to the [Mayflower](#) in order to show the tensions that have existed in the U.S., since the very beginning, between the [religious view of the world](#) and the [business view of the world](#).

On November 10, 1620, a group of English families left Holland (where some had been living for 11 years, after fleeing England where they had been persecuted for their religion) and landed at what became Plymouth, Massachusetts. For them, America offered them a land of religious freedom where they could freely practice their religion and not be subjected to the exactions of a state-run official religion. — It is therefore no accident that nearly 200 years later, in the first amendment of the Founding Fathers' **Bill of Rights**, adopted two years after the 1787 Constitution, the government is expressly prohibited from infringing upon freedom of religion, among other freedoms, such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the right of assembly, and the right to petition the Government.

What is less well known is the fact that the 104 passengers (some of them called themselves "The Pilgrims") were divided into two nearly equal-sized groups. *One group of 50 people was composed of the more religious ones. They called themselves the "Saints" and they called the other 54 passengers the "Foreigners" because these were people who had been recruited by London merchants and who essentially were mainly interested in the economic opportunities that the new colony, they hoped, would offer them.

During the trip, there were continuous quarrels between the two groups. This was settled by the signing of an agreement between the two, proclaiming equality among the colonists (whether religious or not) and the establishment of a "*Civill body Politick*", governed by "*just and equall Lawes*" (*sic*). This agreement, called the **Mayflower Compact**, represents the beginning of the American civil government. It is fundamentally a compromise between religion and business.

There was also another permanent European colony, which was established by the London Company in Jamestown, Virginia, on May 14, 1607, thirteen years earlier. Captain John Smith was the leader of 105 men, whose principal mission was to find gold and to become rich.

Therefore, among the first 209 Americans of European origin, about one fourth were deeply religious, but the other three quarters came to make money and get rich. —I sort of think that this is about the same thing today between the business-oriented people and the very religious people, although the latter group has been gaining importance and influence over the last half century.

As to the right to free enterprise, it can be said that the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution somewhat guarantees such a right since it says "*No State shall deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law.*"

As to freedom of religion, this may explain why there is no official state religion in the United States. Even before the **War of Independence (1776 to 1783)**, a majority of American colonists had been anxious to preserve freedom of religion, and they had revolted against British rule, when the British attempted to establish the Anglican Church as the state religion, as they did in the states of Virginia and New York.

That may explain why, after the War of Independence, the leaders of the new nation chose to establish a fundamentally lay republic that is expected to remain neutral on matter of religion. The Preamble to the 1787 **United States Constitution** states clearly that the new constitution promotes secular political objectives, not religious ones: "*We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution*

for the United States of America.” There is no reference to religion there. And, for good measure and to be clearly understood, the Founding Fathers added Article VI to the Constitution, which says expressly that there should be no religious litmus test to occupy any public function in the United States.

That is why, unlike the constitutions of some other countries, the U.S. Constitution makes no reference whatsoever to a deity. In Canada, which remained within the British Empire much longer, our constitution makes a direct reference to God, declaring that our constitution is based upon *“the supremacy of God and the rule of law”*.

The United States Constitution is much closer to the [French Constitution](#), which expressly defines France as a secular nation: *“France is an indivisible, secular, democratic, and social Republic, assuring equality before the law of all citizens without distinction of origin, race, or religion, and respecting all beliefs.”*

The two constitutions, both the American and the French, derive their inspiration from the same democratic principle of government. Indeed, in a democracy, the right to vote and to engage in political activity changes the balance of power in a country and it opens the door for the establishment of a government, in Lincoln’s famous words, *“of the people, by the people, and for the people.”*

The French and the American constitutions have brought democracy to the world because they proclaim the important religion-neutral principle that all political power emanates from the consent of the people, and that, consequently, it is not in the government’s domain to concern itself with religious matters. This is the principle of the neutrality of the state in matters of religion.

While less explicit than the French Constitution, the United States Constitution implies, at least, the principle of laicity and secularism in the First Amendment (the Establishment Clause), which I have already mentioned: *“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”* . Indeed, to make things clear enough, President Thomas Jefferson, on New Year’s Day, 1802, explained in a widely known official letter that the Establishment Clause meant that there should be *“a wall of separation between church and state,”*—not a door—a wall.

In the past, American courts have interpreted the First Amendment and Jefferson’s explanation to mean that there is an obligation, on the part of the government, not to get involved in churches’ activities, not to spend public money on religions and not to favor any one religion over another. They have also referred, for example, to the 1797 Treaty of Tripoli. The *Treaty of Tripoli*, initiated by president George Washington (1732-1799) and signed into law by president John Adams (1735-1826), officially proclaimed that: *“ the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion; as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquility, of Mussulmen; and, as the said States never entered into any war, or act of hostility against any Mahometan nation, it is declared by the parties, that no pretext arising from religious opinions, shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries.”*

Treaty of Tripoli, Article XI, 1797.

President James Madison (1751-1836) is probably the American president who expressed

himself the most clearly on the question, stating that there should be a total separation between church and state: *"The number, the industry, and the morality of the priesthood, and the devotion of the people have been manifestly increased by the total separation of the Church from the State."* Thus, for James Madison and other American founders, the separation of church and state was not only a requirement of political freedom, it was also a mean to safeguard religion from being encroached upon by politics and politicians.

It is paradoxical, indeed, that in Canada, where the titular head of state is also the head of a church (the Church of England), we have a tradition and a political culture which are decidedly more secular than those of the United States, especially as it has been witnessed in recent years in the U.S. with the establishment of faith-based public programs and in the speeches of American politicians.

Enough of this Church and state stuff. My coming book ["The Code for Global Ethics"](#) will deal in much deeper detail on this topic.

II- The second important political tension in the U.S. is between the Jefferson and Hamilton political philosophies of [democratic rule](#) versus an [aristocratic rule](#).

Just as some wanted to establish a theocracy in early America, the early American leaders were divided on the question of democracy, and as to whether a popular and decentralized democratic republic was better than a centralized aristocratic republic.

on the question of democracy vs. aristocracy, the two American polar personalities were [Thomas Jefferson](#) (Secretary of State in the first Washington government) and [Alexander Hamilton](#) (Secretary of the Treasury in the same government). Each was a follower of one of two opposite British political philosophers.

Jefferson (who became the 3rd U.S. President) was a disciple of both the French political thinker [Montesquieu \(1689-1755\)](#), (*"The Spirit of the Laws"*, 1748), and of the British philosopher [John Locke \(1632-1704\)](#). In his classic book, (*"Second Treatise of Government"*, 1690), Locke refuted the divine right of kings and who argued that people were sovereign and had the right overthrow their governments. This was of course the credo of most of the 55 "Founding Fathers" who supported and fought the War of Independence against royalist Great Britain and George the 3rd, and who signed the US Constitution.

And, when came the time to write a constitution, the founders did not want absolute power concentrated in one man or one branch of government, but rather they wanted a decentralization of power which would protect individual rights from government, with "checks and balances" within government, first between the states and the federal government (federalism), but also with "checks and balances" or [the separation of powers](#) between the Judiciary, the Legislative and the Executive.

For example, they introduced a clause in the Constitution requiring that only Congress could declare a war (Art. I, Sect. 8- cl. 11); that the Right of Habeas Corpus cannot be suspended except for cause (Art. I, Sect.9-cl. 2); that the President, Vice President and all civil Officers of the United States can be removed from Office by Impeachment (Art. II, Sect. 4) and that *"no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States."* (Art. VI, cl. 3).

On the other hand, there were those, like Alexander Hamilton, who were wary of giving so much power to the people. They feared that the government would be weak and unstable. They were followers of the British political philosopher [Thomas Hobbes \(1588 - 1679\)](#). Hobbes did not believe in democratic rule as such, but rather defended the right of kings and aristocracies to rule the masses, for their own good. For instance, Hobbes wrote that people have no right to revolt against the government, no matter how oppressive, but they should instead, and I quote him, *“expect their reward in Heaven.”* Thus, long before Karl Marx, the idea that [religion is the opiate of the masses](#) was clearly expressed by Hobbes.

For Jefferson, Hamilton was a “monarchist” at heart and an aristocrat. Indeed, Hamilton had argued in favor of a President elected, yes, but for life, and a Senate modeled on the British Chamber of Lords, also elected for life. In his plan, the President would have an absolute veto. Only the House of Representatives would have had to be elected.

If Hamilton were alive today, he would be an ally of President George W. Bush and of Vice President Dick Cheney and he would be in favor of the notion of a [Unitary Executive](#) or of an “imperial presidency”, i.e. a president with de facto dictatorial powers and a subservient Congress. (Hamilton even proposed the abolition of state governments and that the federal government should appoint the State governors.) President George W. Bush has added a [clause to more than 750 laws](#) passed by Congress that he has signed, stating that they may not apply to the president and that he may bypass them if he chooses to do so.

Hamilton, if no democrat, had other qualities: he fostered the development of capital markets, he encouraged commerce, and he stood for sound fiscal policy. On the whole, he was more interested in the economy than in politics per se.

As we know, Hamilton was killed in a duel with Vice President Aaron Burr on July 12 1804, and his portrait is on the \$10 bill. Jefferson died the same day as John Adams, on July 1, 1826 and his portrait appears on the \$2 bill and on the 5-cent nickel. Jefferson’s face is also on Mount Rushmore.

III- Americans have also been divided regarding [isolationism](#) in international affairs versus active foreign [interventionism](#).

This is the third big trend and dilemma in American political philosophy.

On the whole, America’s [Founding Fathers](#) tended to be isolationists and did not want to get involved in the games that European empires (the British, the French, the Portuguese, the Spaniards which all had so-called colonies) were playing around the world. For example, [George Washington \(1732-1799\)](#) said: *“It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world.”* Besides, they were too busy developing the Louisiana Territory that Jefferson had bought from Napoleon in 1806 for \$14 million [\$11,250,000 plus cancellation of debts worth \$3,750,000]. This was a territory, East of the Rockies and located on both sides of the Mississippi River that went from New Orleans to the Canadian border. That’s 23 percent of the territory of the United States today.

This approach began to change in 1823 with the [Monroe Doctrine](#), when President [James Monroe \(1758-1831\)](#) declared that the USA would not tolerate any European nation trying to establish a colony in the Americas, This had the effect of placing the entire South American continent under American influence.

This was followed by the [U.S.-Mexican War of 1846 to 1848](#), after the U.S. annexed the independent state of Texas in 1845, under President James K. Polk with the emerging doctrine of “Manifest Destiny.”

Most of the Republicans (then called Whigs) in the North and South, including then Congressman Abraham Lincoln, opposed the war on the grounds that Texas was a Mexican province, but most of the Democrats in the South supported it. In the nineteenth century, this became the main feature of American politics: Republicans tended to be isolationists, while Democrats tended to be more interventionists in foreign affairs.

This all changed at the turn of the twentieth century with the Republican administration of [William McKinley \(1841-1901\)](#), a very religious man. McKinley, and one of his principal secretaries, Teddy Roosevelt, crafted an imperialist foreign policy on the commonly held belief that it was America’s duty as a Christian republic to spread democracy throughout the world. Armed with this new ideology, they launched the first American foreign war of aggression against Spain, in 1898.

The U.S. launched the [Spanish-American war](#) after the U.S.S. Maine incident in the port of Havana, when an explosion in the visiting battle ship killed 266 American sailors. The explosion took place on February 15, 1898. Although it was most likely an accident, the media empires of Hearst and Pulitzer stoked the fire of war against Spain, and there was a war, even if the pretext was somewhat flimsy. The Spanish-American war allowed the United States to *de facto* annex the island of Cuba, the Island of Puerto Rico and the Islands of the Philippines. In 1903, Teddy Roosevelt’s administration took over the country of Panama.

Therefore, we can say that the first part of the twentieth century saw the triumph of the ideology of foreign intervention, especially in Central and South America and in the Caribbean. After the McKinley administration, which had an openly imperialistic foreign policy, the [Woodrow Wilson administration](#) tried to abandon the previous administrations’ imperialist and unilateralist foreign policy by promoting the right of self-determination for all peoples throughout the world. They believed the people in every country should have the right to choose their own governments. This was the famous Wilsonian idealistic, progressive and multilateralist American foreign policy that many successive administrations would try to adhere to. The last one in line was the [Bill Clinton administration \(1992-2000\)](#).

But even for President Wilson, events that took place in other countries forced him to embark upon foreign interventions to “make the world safe for democracy.” For example, Mexico fell into a bloody revolution in 1913, when Mexican general Victoriano Huerta overthrew and assassinated the duly elected Mexican President Francisco Madero. The next year, Wilson sent troops to Mexico, and peace with Mexico was achieved only in 1916, through complex negotiations.

Wilson also intervened in Nicaragua to fight rebels, and the same happened in Haiti and in the Dominican Republic. American troops ended up occupying these Caribbean islands for many years.

Altogether, it has been estimated that between 1898 and 1934, the United States intervened four times in Cuba, five times in Nicaragua, seven times in Honduras, four times in the Dominican Republic, twice in Haiti, once in Guatemala, twice in Panama, three times in Mexico and four times in Columbia.

During the other two thirds of the twentieth century, the United States was involved somewhat defensively in the two World Wars against Germany, and in the Cold War against the Soviet Union, until the later collapsed in 1991. There was also the involvements in the Korean war and in the Vietnam war, but generally, U.S. foreign policy, while interventionist, was also multilateralist.

And that brings us to the twenty-first century.

The [Bush-Cheney administration](#) that came into power on January 20, 2001, has been a direct successor to the McKinley-Roosevelt administrations, of one hundred years earlier. Its 2002 so-called [“Bush Doctrine”](#) promoted unilateral foreign interventionism and the self-proclaimed right to launch “preventive wars” against other countries, notwithstanding international law or international institutions such as the United Nations. Here we are today with this “Bush Doctrine” back one hundred years in international relations.—In my book “The New American Empire”, I delve more deeply into this issue.—Of course, the title of my book is somewhat misleading, because the Bush-Cheney’s empire building efforts of today are not new in American history: They are but the old McKinley-Roosevelt imperial foreign policy cloaked in new clothes. Perhaps the book’s title should have been “The New, New American Empire”!

My general conclusion, therefore, is that for two thirds of the twentieth century, various U.S. administrations, beginning with the [Franklin D. Roosevelt administration \(1932-1945\)](#), which was mainly responsible for establishing the [United Nations](#), in 1945, have built a reputation for the United States as a protector of international law, of the right for peoples to self-determination and of international peace. For example, the United States opposed the [Soviet Union](#) when it invaded Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, under what came to be known as the [“Brezhnev Doctrine”](#).

When the Bush-Cheney administration invaded Iraq on March 20, 2003, under a similar “Bush Doctrine” and without the United Nations’ authorization, this had the effect of a shock to a lot of people around the world.

This goes a long way in explaining why President [George W. Bush](#) is presently the most unpopular politician around the world that the U.S. has ever had.

A recent Harris Poll taken in Europe gave these dismal figures on Mr. Bush’s approval rating in five representative countries:

In Italy: 8 percent of approval;

In the UK: 7 percent;

In Spain, 7 percent;

In Germany, 5 percent;

In France, 3 percent.

Considering these figures, maybe some American politicians would do well to meditate about what [Benjamin Franklin](#) called his seven “great virtues” that politicians should practice in public affairs. They are:

- aversion to tyranny;
- support for a free press;
- a sense of humor;
- humility;
- idealism in foreign policy;
- and, tolerance and respect for compromise.

I leave you to be the judge if many contemporary politicians meet Ben Franklin's standards.

Finally, I would say that the three fundamental influences that are observed throughout history in American politics seem to be following a very long cycle of occurrence. In fact, they seem to confirm British historian Arnold Toynbee's one hundred-year cycle. Indeed, Toynbee identified what he called a century-long cycle of colonial or imperialist-like wars over time. And, in this regard, the beginning of the twenty-first century looks like a duplicate of the beginning of the twentieth century: then, Great Britain was involved in the [Boer War](#) in South Africa while the U.S. was involved in the Spanish-American War. Today, both countries are involved in the Middle East wars, the Afghanistan war and the [Iraq war](#).

It may not be a complete coincidence that such periods, marked by colonial zeal, are also periods when religious sentiment is running high. And, since wars require a concentration of power, it may not be a coincidence either that it is during such periods that political theories about the need for a strong presidency and the Unitary Executive abound, with the purpose of turning the presidency into a virtual dictatorship. These three powerful social and political trends seem to go parallel to each other.

Therefore, the question seems to be obvious: To what extent do the three main social and political trends that I have observed in American politics tend to reinforce each other at certain periods? This is a question that political scientists and historians should investigate further.

See graph [Indexes](#)

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