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Historiography of Modern US History

There are many different ways to evaluate the ideas which have shaped modern US history. This essay will attempt to address the various ways that politicians and public figures have addressed the power of the national government, as balanced against individual as well as state's rights. However, this is not simply a review of the political history of America, but also the trends in the scholarship of those ideas as they have developed over time.

One of the most helpful tools to the historian of ideas is to generate a periodical framework in which to understand how and when certain ideas developed and were expressed within a society. Generally speaking, most recent historians have accepted Bruce Ackermann's general framework of an early, mid, and modern Republican period of American governance. (*We the People. 3 Volumes,* 1993, 2000, 2014) Although there is not a complete consensus, most historians accept Ackermann's decision to begin the period of Modern American Government in the New Deal Era. Jacqueline Dowd Hall adopts this framework in an attempt to demonstrate a continuity of civil rights ideology (and more broadly a human rights movement that she terms the "Long Civil Rights Movement", a construct also adopted by Julian Bond in his article "From Civil Rights to Human Rights.", 2014) since the New Deal Era that has and is still taking place. Roberta N. Haar ("INSURGENCY AND AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY: The Case of George McGovern. 2017) adopted a similar framework for understanding the emergence of the Neo-conservative movement as an offshoot from the fundamental split of the New Deal Democratic coalition. Alan Brinkley also viewed the New Deal as the beginning of the modern political ideological era. For most historians, "modern" American political thought began in 1932, whether those ideas related to constitutional issues, social issues, or foreign policy.

However, there are a few historians who view these ideas in a broader context, and it is the framework proposed by these historians that I wish to evaluate. Bertrand de Jouvenel, (*On Power, 1945)* argued that the power of the central government was essentially moving in a linear fashion toward authoritarianism, and that various elements within the society, expressing their power within society as well as government, are the only truly effective check on Power's expansion. Jouvenel argued that America and Britain were particularly resilient to the expansion of power because of the enshrinement of the aristocracy as a separate branch of government which had veto capacity to limit executive power. Jouvenel could not have known what the developments of the American government would be after the writing of his book, but his observations seem to be predictive in many cases. He wasn't necessarily attempting to predict the trajectory of the relationship Americans (or any other group of people) would have with their government, but rather made a general set of observations based on what he noted had taken place within virtually every other society historically. Obviously, Jouvenel was writing during World War II, and was acutely interested not only in American government, but in the relationship in general between Power and the people who fell under its sovereignty.

Writing after Jouvenel, Matthew C. Waxman's article "THE POWER TO WAGE WAR SUCCESSFULLY," drew many of the same conclusions about the actual trajectory of the American government after 1945 (which was when Jouvenel wrote his book.) Waxman argued that beginning in the Progressive Era, the American government adopted the general idea that the national government has the authority to suspend civil liberties in order to win a conflict "by any means necessary." Waxman noted that Charles Evans Hughes, who had first given the speech articulating this position, eventually came to oppose its application during the Great Depression, and that the trend had continued and even expanded during the Cold War. Raoul Berger

(*Government by Judiciary, 1977)* made similar arguments about the consolidation of federal power through the application of the 14th Amendment. Jouvenel, Waxman, and Berger all treated the national government as though it was a separate and hostile entity to the American people, despite presumably representing them. Equally significantly, all three connected the expansion of power as linear, and as spanning a time period that pre-dated the New Deal.

Most historians have viewed Americans' ideas about their government in less stark ways, or even chosen to evaluate these ideas as influenced by a broader international trend not necessarily related to the dynamics of the relationship at all. Many historians have noted the inter-war period of history as a time of the rise of authoritarianism globally, but many American history specialists have also noted that America was not an exception to this trend. Kiran Klaus Patel, for example, in his 2007 book *The New Deal: A Global History,* argued that the expansion of the role of the American national government's authority over individuals was part of a global trend toward authoritarianism. What was novel about his approach was that he argued that America was not late in developing this trend, as was traditionally accepted, but was rather firmly in the middle of the global movement toward authoritarianism. Claude Carson Smith had written an article in 1934 entitled "The Dictatorship of Franklin D. Roosevelt" so Patel's argument had historical precedent, even as the history was being written. A.J.P Taylor, in *The Origins of the Second World War (1968)* noted the expansion of the New Deal government, and its success in beginning to maximize the efficiency of the economic output of America. Lewis S. Feuer, in a 1962 article titled "American Travelers to the Soviet Union 1917-32: The Formation of a Component of New Deal Ideology" also noted that many Americans were interested in the scientific implications and possibilities of the Soviet economic authoritarianism, even if they didn't particularly want to fully replicate them in America. Alan Dawley (*Changing the World,*

2003) made similar arguments about the Progressive Era; claiming that it is impossible to understand the domestic American Progressive policies without understanding the broader context of American imperialism. Of course, this scholarship doesn't negate Jouvenel's premises, since he argued that the conflict between Power and People is universal, although he does tend to treat it as more of a closed system, rather than part of a dynamic global exchange.

The work of these five historians clearly demonstrates that there has been an acute awareness throughout time that American ideology as it related to the expansion of centralized power was not changing in a vacuum, but rather was a part of a dynamic process that was taking place throughout the world. In many cases, the work of Smith and Feuer in particular were significantly ahead of their times. Much scholarship that began to emerge toward the end of the Cold War and continuing into our contemporary period has focused on international issues, rather than simply focusing on America and American policy and ideas.

One example of one such historian would be John Morton Blum, who essentially argued that the American Great Depression lasted as long as it did precisely because they were unwilling to apply Keynesian principles of economic interventionism. Specifically, America was isolated, and precisely because of that ideological and political isolation, it responded in very different ways from the rest of the world. This is also the essential point made by Robert Dallek in *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945 with a New Afterword (1995)* who admitted that while Roosevelt himself was a globalist, he was limited ideologically by the American political system which refused to become embroiled in international affairs.

These were common assumptions, since the traditional narrative, taught in most high school and undergraduate textbooks is that Americans, disillusioned by their experiences in World War I, sought to pursue isolationist policies. This idea is further reinforced by the general

assumption that America was primarily xenophobic and unwilling to be influenced by foreign ideas since it had become involved in international affairs during the Progressive Era. This was the essential argument made by Cybelle Fox in her book, *Three Worlds of Relief (2012),* that demonstrated that Americans in the Progressive Era were extremely race-conscious and actively sought to neutralize outside ideas, although in this context the outside ideas were particularly those from Mexico, Africa, and Asia.

The same trends are evident in most Cold War scholarship, in which early scholarship tended to focus almost exclusively on the United States and Soviet Union as monolithic political entities that were involved in a bi-polar struggle but has recently expanded to take a more globalist perspective. Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s article, "Origins of the Cold War." (1967) underscores and typifies the general assumption of the 1950's and 1960's that understanding the Cold War only required understanding the foreign policies of the United States and Soviet Union, in particular how they related to one another. Schlesinger also took the threat of the Soviet Union seriously and legitimized the American actions throughout the world as necessary to oppose the expansion of the Soviet threat. John Lewis Gaddis (*The Cold War: a New History* 2005) also evaluated the Cold War in this way, although he concluded that the actual threat of the war was much less serious than was believed at the time. A historian who rejected this perspective is Odd Arne Westad, who argued in *The Cold War: A World History* (*2018*) that the Cold War had many facets and contributors; not just the East/West schism which had traditionally been purported. Other monographs, like Max Hasting's *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy (2018)* pay attention to American political events but tend to focus more strongly on the actual events that took place within the parts of the world where the Cold War conflict was taking place. Some historians, like Campbell Craig and Fredrik Logevall (*America's Cold War: The*

Politics of Insecurity (*2009*) have attempted to tack a nuanced middle-ground interpretation that recognized the validity of globally (or regionally-focused outside of America itself) focused research, but also agreeing with Schlesinger's basic premise that since America and the Soviet Union were the primary actors in the conflict, it should be understood primarily within this context. The common theme among all of these histories is that they tend to treat the government as a proxy for the people of the nation itself when it comes to international affairs, and therefore as expressing the general will of the citizens of the country (either explicitly or implicitly) without deeply evaluating the dynamics of how the ideas of the people are being expressed.

Interestingly, more historians have become increasingly interested in studying the relationship between the American government and people in time periods like the Cold War or Great Depression as isolated dynamics. This isn't to say that these historians reject a global impact, it's just that they are attempting to explain on a deeper level why Americans interacted the way they have with their government, what ideas influenced these dynamics, and what the outcomes were within the American political system.

For example, the previously noted work by Campbell Craig and Frederick Logevall wrote their book primarily on the fact that the Cold War, in particular the expansion of the military-industrial complex as a powerful interest group, and its influence in perpetuating the conflict because it served the economic interests of this interest group. Chad W. Seagren, and David R. Henderson co-authored an article titled "Why We Fight: A Study of U.S. Government War-Making Propaganda," that evaluated the complex relationship between citizens and the government within American policy. Interestingly, they concluded that American citizens are particularly susceptible to propaganda because they vote and therefore seek a limited amount of

information related to foreign policy to do their “due diligence”, but generally receive their information about foreign policy from the government. Therefore, the government itself has a profound influence in America on the development of popular will and public support for its actions in foreign policy. Michael S. Sherry’s *In the Shadow of War: The United States Since the 1930's.* (1995) also evaluated the Cold War as a function of the American people’s expression of a need for the perpetuation of a conflict in order to serve the economic needs of the nation in the Post-WWII Era, which created legitimacy for the perpetual war-production state.

The arguments made by Sherry, Craig & Logevall, and Seagren & Henderson all serve to confirm Jouvenel’s framework that in order to expand, Power tends to work with the common people, essentially promising safety in exchange for an expansion of its power. Murray Rothbard noted this tendency in *The Progressive Era*. (2017) where he argued that the government consciously courted different groups in order to justify an unconstitutional expansion of its own power. Historians like John Milton Jr. indicated that leaders like Woodrow Wilson specifically selected those groups by which they would be pressured into political action. It is worth noting that with the exception of Rothbard, none of these scholars’ works were meant to demonstrate this dynamic, or if it was, it was not written about as a problem, yet their conclusions essentially support Jouvenel’s basic observation of the relationship between Power and the people.

Milton’s and Rothbard’s arguments about the Progressive Era clashed with more traditional views like John W. Chambers **(***The Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920*, 2000) who found the origins of government action to be responding to popular support, rather than the other way around. Chambers in particular highlighted the disparate goals of various groups within American society and argued that they contributed to volatile and

shifting political winds that produced pressure for various policies. Tony Freyer argued a variation of this when he claimed that the changes which took place within the business models of the newly industrialized and corporate America forced policy-makers to adopt new strategies of regulation. Robert Korstead (*Civil Rights Unionism, 2003)* made the same case for the influence that labor unions had on the subsequent development of New Deal ideology. Freyer, Korstead, and Chambers' Power is responsive to the American people, and not a separate entity with separate goals.

The essential tension in historiography between Power as its own entity and power as a puppet of popular sovereignty is also apparent in historiography of America's involvement in World War II. James T. Sparrow (*Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government,* 2011) contends that the American public largely accepted the program which was prescribed to them because of a rise and redefinition of nationalistic identity which bore very little imprint of the American Founding. In particular, Sparrow noted that the American notions of federalism and general distrust of large standing armies were over-ridden during a crisis point and have been kept in a general suspended animation via the continual threat of the Cold War and other armed conflicts to the point where the expansion of the government which was initially considered to be unprecedented has long-since become standard fare. Conversely, David Kennedy (*Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War*, *1929-1945*, 1999.) argued that the New Deal and World War II together led to a Democratic coalition that dominated politics in America for a half century.

Perhaps a synthesis of Sparrow and Kennedy's arguments is represented in the scholarship of Alan Brinkley (*The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War.* 1996) although Brinkley's arguments were articulated prior to Sparrow or Kennedy's books.

Brinkley argued that the New Deal was indeed a time of top-down government expansion, but that by 1937, the American public began to push back in substantial and notable ways that ultimately forced a compromised position.

One subdomain of modern American historiography which has tended to have a more monolithic view of government's relationship with people is that of the Civil Rights Movement. Interestingly, most civil rights historians tend to reject Jouvenel's framework in almost every way. This is precisely what Berger was attempting to correct in *Government by Judiciary* because he believed that the government was again doing precisely what Jouvenel had predicted it would: work with the common people to expand its own power at the expense of constitutional restraints. Most civil rights historians tend to assume that the government is nothing but an expression of the general will, and that until the movement took place (and in many's argument, still today) it was simply expressing the wrong will. In this case, the government served as a proxy in which various sectors of society actually battled with one another for ascendency. This was precisely Hall's argument, although she broadened it to be inclusive of other disadvantaged groups. John Ditmer (*Local People, 1995)* argued that the same grassroots influences were instrumental to the character of the movement. Bruce Ackermann (*We the People, Vol. 3, 2017)* actually went one step further and argued that the constitutional system of checks and balances that allowed civil rights leaders to make fundamental changes that forced the government to express more of the general will. Christopher Caldwell (*The Age of Entitlement: America Since the Sixties,* 2020.) is one of the few and emerging revisionist historians to join Berger in challenging the general historiography of the Civil Rights Movement as an unconstitutional governmental expansion of power. Given the continuing acceptance of

Hall's general framework for understanding the Civil Rights Movement in general, it seems highly unlikely that this book is representative of an emerging trend.

In one way or another, all of these historians have participated in an ongoing debate about the nature of the relationship between the American people and the American government; an argument which is at the core of all history of American politics: did the people of America institute their government among men in order to serve the needs of the people, as Jefferson claimed in the Declaration of Independence, or should they be looking for the ways in which they can be better servants of their nation, as Kennedy once advised?