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Wesley Allen Riddle: The American Political Tradition Study Guide

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WESLEY ALLEN RIDDLE: THE AMERICAN POLITICAL TRADITION STUDY GUIDE, 1998-2003 Steven Alan Samson

Key Concepts

American civilization has stood upon a unity of Dissenter-Protestant cultural and political tradition. America's political economy is based on the sanctity of private property, the philosophy of economic individualism, and maximum liberty consistent with the rule of law.

The Great Awakening was the first significant common experience that served to knit the colonies. "The basic ideas of the American Republic all derive from the Bible and from medieval Christianity." Totalitarian movements thrive in populations lacking interior guidelines (individual self-government). Such people (*idiots* in the Greek sense) look to the state and pop culture rather than God for guidance. The denial of objective truth reduces law to the function of raw power.

Western notions of voluntary behavior and limits on state compulsion derive from Christian doctrine. Medieval political theory: representative government, the right of insurrection, and constitutionalism. American Whig-Dissenters opposed both royal and parliamentary supremacy.

Social disintegration may be due to the transmutation of politics into a determiner of society's ends. "In all free states, the constitution is fixed;" it requires reference to substantive principles.

Important features of the Constitution: separation of powers, checks and balances, federalism. Hamiltonians and Jeffersonians found common ground in the *federal* tradition of dual sovereignty. Government was simply needed to *protect* the maximum amount of what they valued most: *liberty*. *Liberal historians use the Civil War to exaggerate constitutional change in order to validate changes they approve and to avoid defending them on substantive constitutional grounds.*

Calhoun's point: the orbits of respective sovereignty between state and federal levels are inviolable. States joined the Union to better insure their viability and self-determination; no state ever voluntarily joined the Union to destroy what was unique about itself.

A state must be able to revert to a previously constitutional position.

The Civil War settled two questions that plagued the country from its inception: slavery and secession. The relatively weak individual needs state government to intercede or *interpose* on his behalf. Americans are the most Whiggish or libertarian people among democratic nations because distrust of a strong state was at the core of revolutionary ideology.

Socialism assumes the need for a powerful state and is thus antithetical to American political tradition. Classical liberal values have mostly negated the development of class consciousness (group loyalty). Our republican dialectic amounts to a range of competing positions within the Whiggish tradition. The assimilation of newcomers into this political culture has helped preserve stability and the narrowness of the political spectrum.

Both sides of the ratification debate became part of the American *constitutional* tradition.

Poles of the republican dialectic: populism vs. elitism, progressivism (hierarchy) vs. expansionism (territoriality), parochialism (localism) vs. nationalism (centralism), laissez faire vs. central planning, agrarianism (rurality) vs. commercialism (urbanity).

A host of special interests now align with both parties, two sides against the middle class, in order to redistribute wealth to favored causes and constituents.

The dialectic consists of free-ranging dialogue between ideas that correspond to relative degrees of Conservatism or reform, consolidation or confederation, idealism or pragmatism.

Only the United States is dominated by two loosely structured coalition parties; the correlation between class and party affiliation is weaker than in all other industrial countries.

Public control of the policy-formation process in the United States is the most populist in the world.

Defeated parties can still win another day.

The checks and balances in the federal government mean that at least one branch will likely mount opposition, even to the big winner.

In third party system, periods of stalemate or gridlock have replaced the old intervals of consensus. The appearance of third parties typically signifies coalition shifts and party realignments.

A. INTRODUCTION

1. Thesis: American civilization stands upon "a unity of cultural and political tradition" (Hofstadter). Identify three facets of our political economy. Why is the reinvigoration of American tradition of **ordered liberty** necessary today? What are its fruits and how is it threatened?
2. What are the five key elements of the American political tradition?

B. RELIGION (2-9)

1. Early Dissenter-Protestant Character
 - a. Assembly of Soldiers in Newburyport, September 17, 1775
 - b. Visit to the Tomb of **George Whitefield**
2. Revolution as a Holy War
 - a. Legacy of the **Great Awakening** (1720s-30s)
 - 1) Liberty Bell
 - 2) Patriotic Songs: Chester (William Billings)
 - b. Millennial Hopes
3. Secularist Error
 - a. Denial that the Country Was Conceived as a Christian Republic
 - 1) But What Has Changed Since 1820 and, Again, 1920?
 - b. Recent Religious Revival
4. Religious Faith as the Progenitor of Secular Freedoms
 - a. M. Stanton Evans: *The Theme Is Freedom*
 - 1) What Do Evans and McDonald See as the Basic Ideas of the Republic?
5. Perennial Problem: **Totalitarianism** Thrives Where People **Lack Interior Guidelines** [Evans, p. 43 on despotism]
 - a. The State Can Only Provide Exterior Guidelines that Come to Substitute for Religious Values
 - 1) People Need Internal Moral Gyroscopes
 - 2) Secular Humanism Is Imposed as Social Policy by the Government
 - b. Pop Culture Displaces Moral Sensibilities and Self-Discipline
6. Slide into an Amoral Abyss Results in a Society in Crisis
 - a. **Denial of Objective Truth Reduces Law to Raw Power**
 - b. Western Reliance on Voluntary Behavior and Limits on State Compulsion Is *Derived* from Christian Doctrine
7. Misrepresentation of the Middle Ages
 - a. Lord Acton: **Representative Government** Was Almost Universal [Evans, p. 31]
 - b. Constitutionalism: **Magna Carta** and **Natural Law**
 - c. England Retained Free Institutions of Middle Ages [Evans, p. 32]
 - d. Medieval Theory Resuscitated in the Conflict over Royal Supremacy
8. English Whig-Protestants vs. American Whig-Dissenters
 - a. Parliamentary Supremacy Rejected by Americans
 - 1) Emphasis on **Common Law** Tradition against Cromwell's Reign
 - b. Selective Adoption of Common Law Precedent within Fixed Bounds
 - c. Resistance against Imperial Reorganization after French and Indian War, Done in the Name of **Virtual Representation**
9. French Revolution as a Product of the Enlightenment
 - a. Rights of Man Determined and Protected by Man Alone

- b. How the American Constitution Differed
- 10. **John Locke's Social Contract Theory**
 - a. Enlightenment Ideas Helped Spark Evangelical Revivalism
 - b. Result: Great Awakening
 - c. Locke's Christianity
 - d. Daniel Boorstin: Politics Concerned Means, Not Ends
 - e. More Recent Transmutation of Politics into an Arena
- C. THE CONSTITUTION (9-14)
 - 1. Idea of a **Fixed Constitution** [See Evans, p. 311]
 - a. **Samuel Adams**
 - b. Precedents Might Otherwise Lead toward Unfettered Power
 - c. American Decline: Failure to Live Constitutionally
 - 1) Thomas Jefferson: Treating It as a Blank Paper by Construction
 - 2. Fixed Constitution Requires Reference to **Substantive Principles**
 - a. "Reference Points Anterior to, and Controlling upon, the Development of Pure Tradition. These Reference Points Are Ultimately Religious and Axiomatic in Nature." [Evans, 93-94]
 - 2. Origins of Ordinary Americans' Values
 - a. Reformed Protestant Christianity (Barry Shain, M. E. Bradford, Rene Williamson)
 - b. Not in Classical Republicanism or Rational Humanism (Liberalism)
 - 4. First Amendment (Fisher Ames)
 - a. Compatibility with State Laws
 - 5. Meaning of Thomas Jefferson's "Wall of Separation"
 - 6. Fluidity vs. Fixity
 - 7. Secular Holy Writ
 - a. Virginia Plan
 - b. James Madison: Father of Constitution
 - c. Two-Year Ratification Debate
 - 1) Federalist Papers
 - 2) Bill of Rights
 - 8. **Separation of Powers and Checks and Balances**
 - a. Federalist 51 (Madison)
 - b. Bureaucracy (Unchecked "Fourth Branch")
 - c. Judiciary (Oliver Ellsworth)
 - d. Monetary Policy (Alexander Hamilton)
 - 9. Nature of the Supremacy Clause
 - a. "Pursuance of the Constitution"
 - b. State Role in Amendments
 - 10. Federalism
- D. FEDERALISM (14-20)
 - 1. Differences of Interpretation
 - a. Republican Ideological Dialectic (see pp. 21-25)
 - 2. Federalism: Crux of the Republican Consensus
 - a. **Dual Sovereignty** Is an Identifiably American Idea
 - b. Recent Falling Away
 - 3. Definition of Federalism
 - a. Rationale: To Limit Access to Superordinate Power
 - 4. Purpose of Government: To Protect Liberty
 - a. Need for Checks and Balances
 - 5. **Foedus: Covenant**
 - a. Grassroots Nature of Human Affairs
 - b. Expression of **Local Self-Government**, Not a National Plebiscite
 - c. Minimalist State

6. Altered Federal-State Relationship
 - a. Civil War Played a Role But Did Not Justify Social Revolution
 - b. Bill of Rights Began to Be Applied to the States through the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (1925-): **Incorporation Doctrine**
 7. Subterfuge by the Supreme Court: Departure from Original Intent and Natural Law
 - a. Warning by **John C. Calhoun**
 8. Reasons for States to Join the Union: Protect Viability and Self-Determination
 - a. To Enhance or Secure the Uniqueness of the States
 9. The National Bill of Rights Did Not Apply to the States: Each Had Its Own
 - a. Constitutionality of School Prayer
 - b. Judicial Edict
 10. **Civil War Settled Two Questions:** Slavery and Secession
 - a. Reasons for the Decline of Federalism
 - b. **Turning Point: 1913**
 11. States as Laboratories of Liberty
 12. Interposition by States to Protect Liberty of Individuals
 - a. States Can Restore the Public Debate
- E. REPUBLICAN DIALECTIC (21-25)
1. **Dialectic** [Part of the Classical *Trivium*: Grammar, Dialectic, Rhetoric]
 - a. Constitutional Parameters (Boundaries)
 - b. Breach of the Dialectic during the Civil War
 2. Whiggish Tradition
 - a. No Socialist Party
 - b. Equality Refers, Conceptually, to a Meritocracy
 - 1) Classical Liberal Values Have Negated the Development of Class Consciousness
 3. Range of Competing Positions within this Tradition
 - a. Filtered through **English Whig** Thought and **Country Party** Practice
 - 1) Newcomers Assimilated [Americanized] into this Culture
 4. Synthesis [Consensus]
 - a. Absence of an Anti-Constitution Party
 - 1) Continuing Ideological Dialectic
 - b. Political Party Systems
 5. Ideological Aspects of the Dialectic: Parties Support Positions that Are Iterative (Repetitive But Slightly Varied) Policy Combinations Based on the Dialectic
 - a. **Populism** (Majoritarianism) vs. **Elitism**
 - b. Progressivism (Temporal) vs. Expansionism (Spatial)
 - c. Localism vs. Nationalism (Centralism)
 - d. Laissez Faire vs. Federal Interventionism
 - e. Agrarianism vs. Commercialism
 6. Dole of the Welfare State: Redistribution of Wealth
 - a. "Freedom from Want"
- F. TWO-PARTY SYSTEM (25-31)
1. Alternating Conceptions of the Republic: Free-Ranging Dialogue
 - a. Broad Party Coalitions
 - b. Founders' Fear of Factions
 2. Weak Correlation between Class and Party Affiliation
 - a. Internal Diversity
 - b. Party Realignment
 3. Importance of Ideas
 - a. Differences Must Be Understood in Dialectical Terms, Not Class
 - b. Wide Range of European Options
 4. Heterogeneity of the Parties and Internal Competition between Antagonistic Factions

- a. Multiplicity of Public Offices
- b. The System Is Never “All or Nothing”
- c. Institutionalized Opposition
- d. Local Party Strongholds
- 5. A Succession of Three Party Systems
 - a. Critical Election Shifts
 - b. **Realignments**
- 6. First Party System (1796-1816)
 - a. Jeffersonian Political Revolution (Realignment) of 1800
 - b. War of 1812
 - c. Consensus: Era of Good Feelings
- 7. Second Party System (1836-1860)
 - a. Whigs
 - b. Realignment
 - c. Sectional Issues
 - d. Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854
 - e. Interlude of Party Politics: Era of Bad Feelings
- 8. Third Party System
 - a. Cycles and Realignments: 1896, 1936
- 9. Transitions
- 10. Summary

Review

Dissenter-Protestant character of the War for Independence	source of secular freedoms
why totalitarianism thrives	what reduces law to raw power
conflicts over royal vs. parliamentary supremacy	role of Middle Ages
Samuel Adams	John Locke
John C. Calhoun	<i>foedus</i>
party cycles and realignments	examples of republican dialectic
	Great Awakening