Arthur Schlesinger’s

Cycles of American History

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The Cycles of American History
by
Arthur Schlesinger

In *The Cycles of American History*¹, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., described the cycles that have characterized U.S. politics over the past 200 years. Schlesinger referred to the cycles as a “recurring struggle between pragmatism and idealism in the American soul.”

**Schlesinger’s Theory**

I. U.S. history is characterized by shifts in national involvement between two forces:
   A. Public Interest
   B. Private Interest

II. Public Action Phases occur roughly every thirty years.
   A. 1775 American Revolution
   B. 1801 Jeffersonian Democracy
   C. 1829 Jacksonian Democracy
   D. 1861 Civil War and Reconstruction
   E. 1901 Progressive Era
   F. 1933 New Deal
   G. 1961 New Frontier and Great Society

III. The cycles are natural and self-generating.
   A. Just as nature gives us tides, seasons, and an ecosystem, history provides a tendency toward equilibrium or homeostasis.
   B. The cycle is found in human psychology.
      1. Human beings are eternally discontented.
      2. It is always eventually time for a change.
   C. The historical cycle is not always determined by external events.
      1. The period 1865-1901 was a period of Private Interest.
         a. The nation experienced two bad depressions.
         b. Democrats and Republicans were in power.
      2. The period 1901-1919 was a period of Public Interest
         a. The nation experienced general prosperity.
         b. Democrats and Republicans were in power.
      3. The 1930s were a period of Public Interest.
         a. The nation was in a depression.
         b. Democrats were in power.
      4. The 1960s were a period of Public Interest.
         a. The nation experienced prosperity.
         b. Democrats were in power.

IV. Each phase breeds its own destruction.
   A. Public Interest
      1. Reform comes in a burst of activity.
      2. A rush of innovation chokes the public.
      3. Sustained public reform is exhausting.
      4. People need time for reflection.
   B. Private Interest
      1. The political climate is characterized by undercurrents of dissatisfaction.
      3. People become bored with materialism.

V. The cycles conform to generational factors.
   A. Note: Generations are a rough unit of measurement and cannot be measured exactly. Generations overlap.
   B. A generation equals roughly thirty years. Fifteen years are spent forming an identity; fifteen years are spent gaining power.
      1. Formative: Ages 16-31?
      2. Gaining power: Ages 31-46?
   C. People are shaped throughout their lives by the events and ideals dominating the time when they arrived at political consciousness (ages 16-25?)
      1. People born between 1946-57 (the birth rate turned downward in 1957) are children of the generation that came of age under Franklin Roosevelt and the grandchildren of people who came of age under Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.
      2. Young people (ages 18-24) who voted for Reagan in 1984 were born between 1960-66 and have no memory of John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. They are the children of the parents who came of age in Eisenhower Era.
      3. “Each generation spends its first fifteen years after coming of political age in challenging the generation already entrenched in power. Then the new generation comes to power itself for another fifteen years, after which its policies pale and the generation coming up behind claims the succession.” (Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.)

VI. Caveats
   A. Beware of interpreting the cycles as a pendulum, public action reforms are rarely undone. The cycles are more a “spiral” than a “pendulum.”
   B. The cycles overlap. We are never strictly in one phase.