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## H.G. Wells and the War of the Words: A British View of United States Politics

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Every four years the citizens of the United States go to the polls to cast their votes for the next President of the United States. As this article is written (September 2014) the process leading to the national election is already well under way. Each of the fifty states conducts its own primary election, at various times, to nominate the final Republican, Democratic and minor third-party political candidates for the final election.

Various incumbent and "wannabe" candidates have lost no time hitting the campaign trail. They extol their virtues and their plans and decry the records and glaring failures of their dangerously-close-to-demented opponents. The Republican Party paints Democrats as anything from "liberal" to "socialist" to alarmingly close to "communistic." Democrats portray their rivals as "stuck in the past," "driving us into the ditch," or hopelessly out of touch with reality.

How do the political party members view themselves? Are Republicans divinely chosen, the true Defenders of the Faith, the only real conservatives? The influential radio commentator Rush Limbaugh hosts his "Limbaugh Institute of Advanced Conservative Studies" [aired on the U.S. Armed Forces Network 810 a.m. radio weekday evenings at 8:00 p.m. in Japan]. Limbaugh routinely mocks most members of the Democrats as "the Left," frequently invoking the near-deified former Republican President Ronald Reagan as the epitome of all things Conservative. During the 2012 Presidential campaign, Democrats countered with former Republican Presidential candidate Mitt Romney's off-shore bank accounts, his penchant for firing people he did not like, and near-total lack of understanding of the problems of most real people, as he was not forced to normally deal with any of them. The former

Republican candidate Paul Ryan was shown to have gleefully abandoned his own plans and principles, to sit at the foot of the man (Romney) who initiated a Massachusetts health plan remarkably like that of President Obama which he (Romney) then publicly decried on a national scale.

What is the average American voter (or foreign observer) to think, as the next Presidential election steadily approaches? Perhaps it is helpful to take a slight detour, to look at the U.S. election scene through the eyes of our British cousins of a slightly earlier era.

Before losing to the Conservative (also known as the Tory) Party, the British Labour Party under Prime Minister Tony Blair steered British interests through domestic and international rocks and shoals. The Labour Party itself was founded in 1900, with direct influences from the earlier Fabian Society, named after the Roman Republic's general Fabius Maximus. He employed scorched earth policies against the invading Carthaginian army, led by their general Hannibal. Fabius's tactics were greatly criticized by other Romans, but were ultimately successful. Deprived of food and other supplies, Hannibal's army was forced to leave Italy and returned to North Africa, where he was finally defeated.

The Fabians, as society members termed themselves, were committed to bringing democratic socialism to Great Britain. The process was to be both gradual and reformist, not revolutionary. They believed it was their duty to continue the ideas of the western European Renaissance. Issues such as social justice and liberal reform led to the Fabians' call for a minimum wage in 1906, support for universal health care rights in 1911, and the ending of hereditary peerages in 1917.

Luminary figures such as George Bernard Shaw, Herbert George (H.G.) Wells and Virginia Woolf were committed Fabians. Their ideas outshone their numbers and spread to other shores. Jawaharlal Nehru in India, Muhammed Ali Jinnah in Pakistan and Lee Kwan Yew in Singapore were ardent Fabians, although Lee later disassociated himself from the movement. Back in Britain, the Fabian Society influenced the Prime Ministers Harold Wilson, Tony Blair and his successor Gordon Brown.

H.G. Wells is perhaps best known as the author of science fiction works such as *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*. Born into humble origins in 1866, he later entered the Commercial Academy for Young Gentlemen. This school routinely prepared its students to work as clerks or shopkeepers. The faculty of this school also imbued in its students a solid distrust of the British working class; this distrust stayed with Wells all during his life.

Wells was very close to his parents and two older brothers. The mother worked as a housekeeper to a wealthy individual. Wells's father was both a professional cricket player and a merchant selling china. The father suffered a leg injury which ended his cricket career. Following the father's injury, the family suffered financial difficulties. At some point, the young Herbert became angry with his parents for not working to improve their positions. He came to believe his parents were willing victims of Victorian society.

Extremely interested in reading, the young Herbert George was able to enter the Normal School of Science in South Kensington. There, he studied biology but left without obtaining a degree. He was, however, able to work as a private school teacher. In 1890 he did graduate from the University of London with a degree in science. He continued to teach, married and authored a biology textbook. He also successfully submitted several articles and stories for popular magazines of the time.

His work, which earned him an increasing income, was a mix of educational articles and what was called at the time "Scientific Romance;" the term "science-fiction" came into vogue later. Given his own background, Wells was a passionate believer in the advantages of education. In his works he explored the effects of British society on its people, and the effects of technology on the world around him. The rapidly expanding technology of the time led many people to believe in various sorts of utopian futures, in which human problems would be solved by that very technology. Wells took a somewhat different point of view. He realized that while the benefits of technology are many and real, there exist in life and in nature elements that simply cannot be controlled by humans, or by their advances in science.

Indeed, the themes of his early works often presented a depressing and desolate future. His first successful novel was *The Time Machine*, which quickly became a hit. Wells viewed the very real possibility that the future would regress, as opposed to the popular idea of progress. He examined the traditional question of good versus evil in the two races of beings encountered by the Time Traveller. On the one hand the Eloi (the supposedly good), living above ground, are in effect parasites, producing nothing and living off the work of others. The Morlocks (the bad) are the underside of the industrial society, literally, in that they live underground, hunt and eat the Eloi. At the end of the novel, the Time Traveller does turn his back on the Victorian time and society in which he grew to manhood. Yet, his return to the distant future is by no means an unbridled grasp of a glorious future. The traveller has found individual happiness and the possibility of greater happiness does exist. Yet, given his own experiences in that often bleak and dangerous future, most of Wells's contemporaries would gladly have chosen Victorian society, and forsaken idealistic, but unrealistic, Utopian dreams.

*The War of the Worlds* was a later effort of Wells, also becoming a hit in British society. In it, Wells examines both the near future and the very technology of which the British people were so enamored. The highly-advanced technology is used, not by humans, but by Martians who invade the Earth and quickly proceed to dominate and murder humans. In effect, the Martians are colonizing the Earth. The themes of colonization, imperialism and war were all of great concern to Wells. The protagonist, the main character, is no great hero. He is simply a human being trying his best to survive.

The ideas which Wells explored in his works, as well as his own background, inexorably led Wells to become more interested in politics, including the effects of politics, and political parties, in the United States as well as in Great Britain. About the beginning of the twentieth century, Wells began to focus more on the possible benefits of the future. He began to believe that no single individual would ever be able to improve society. What was needed was a thorough restructuring of society, which was to be conducted

not by the underclass, but by a well-educated elite group of people, sometimes called the "New Republicans." Thus, in 1903, Wells joined the Fabian Society. He left just four years later, after failing to convince the Society's members to become much more politically active.

As he studied political beliefs of various groups in British society, and as he became more wealthy from the royalties of his writings, Wells began to move more and more into the top levels of society. As did many people, Wells initially believed that World War I would end all wars and supported the British government in its efforts to prosecute the war. Not long after the war, he changed his mind, realizing that the 1919 Treaty of Versailles was a "pseudo-settlement," and would in turn perpetuate some existing problems and introduce new and dangerous problems.

As a possible solution, Wells again turned to the idea of education. The efforts of the New Republicans, and others like them, would improve the areas of politics, economics and society. The ultimate goal, Wells increasingly believed, was a world federation as the ultimate expression of human civilization. One side effect of the elevation of the New Republicans was to be their ability to control the underclass.

Earlier, in 1906, Wells travelled to the United States for the first of some six visits. One result of this first visit was the book *The Future in America*. He admired much of what he saw in the United States, including Theodore Roosevelt in particular. Yet he also believed the citizens of the United States had a long way to go in their general levels of education, particularly in their political education.

Wells noted that two distinctly British political strata were missing from the United States – the "subservient land-bound peasants" (whose sufferings strongly influenced the socialists) as well as the aristocratic Tories. The lack of the former never produced an American "servile tradition." Lack of the latter never produced in the United States a corresponding Tory (equalling Conservative) sense of "state responsibility."

What does the word "Conservative" mean to the British, as well as to other Europeans? In his book *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*,

former Harvard and Stanford Universities (later George Mason University and Hoover Institution) Professor Seymour Martin Lipset writes that in many countries the government allied with the church, resulting in a series of welfare societies. Typically the political leaders gained support from rural landowners and the aristocracy. They "disdained" capitalism, did not much care for the emerging middle class (the bourgeoisie) and were not materialistic. They believed it was their duty to protect the less fortunate members of their societies. Granted there were many exceptions (think of the novels of Charles Dickens) but by and large this was how the system functioned.

Lipset mentions that "liberal" came into use in Spain during the Napoleonic Era. Only later was it applied to a new political party in nineteenth-century Britain. To Europeans, liberals hold to "a deeply anti-statist doctrine" emphasizing the doctrines of laissez-faire. People in North America who hold to this same doctrine are termed, only by the Americans themselves, as "conservatives."

Lipset refers to the Canadian George Grant, a "distinguished conservative intellectual." Grant states Americans (U.S.) conservatives do not have the right to that traditional title. Due to Americans' fixing on "freedom from governmental interference," they are in fact really "old-fashioned liberals." Grant continues that traditional conservatism "asserts the right of the community to restrain freedom in the name of the common good." American self-styled conservatives stress the rights of individuals and ignore "communal rights and obligations" which no self-respecting British (or Canadian!) Tory would ever condone.

The British Lord Max Beloff is quoted as saying that what threatens Conservatism in Great Britain is "its alleged indifference to some of the abuses of capitalism." Lord Beloff has a parting shot to those Americans who title themselves as Conservatives. Most Americans, he wrote, are incapable "of being a conservative in any profound sense."

Back to H.G. Wells. What did this prolific author, public speaker and whirlwind of energy think about what he found in the United States? Some of

his words from *The Future in America* deserve to be quoted here:

It is not difficult to show for example, that the two great political parties in America represent only one English party, the middle-class Liberal party... There are no Tories...and no Labour Party...All Americans are, from the English point of view, Liberals of one sort or another...

What does all of this mean for United States voters? As do the traditional Conservatives (Tories) of Britain and Canada, the Democrats believe it is their duty to provide a social safety net, to promote education, to advocate those same communal rights and obligations, such as paying reasonable taxes based on income. It is the inherent duty of the government to protect the less fortunate members of society, those who truly need a helping hand.

Generally is it the Republicans (think Tea Party) who are now anti-statist, reject government interference, believe in laissez-faire economics (including the widely-discredited "trickle-down economics"), and who deify de-regulated capitalism even at the risk of its ruining the very political system it claims to serve.

So, in the modern United States, it is the Democrats who are closer to the Traditional Tories (or Conservatives) of Britain, Germany, Canada and other countries. Republicans are much closer to the traditional Liberals of those same countries. It is enough to make the prolific author and socially-involved British subject H.G. Wells want to climb back into his time machine and whirr off to a less confusing time. Hmm... Ronald Reagan as the Great Liberal?

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