

Tao, Bush, and the Nature of Things

By Ronald Bruce St John | February 16, 2006

It is customary early in the New Year to recommend good books to read. And the *Tao Te Ching* should be at the top of President Bush's list. Careening from crisis to crisis with approval ratings drooping, the president should consider the opening lines of chapter 80. "If a country is governed wisely, its inhabitants will be content."

Tao Te Ching

Well known by its Chinese title, *Tao Te Ching* can be translated many different ways, including *Book of the Immanence of the Way* or simply *Book of the Way*. It is a 2,500 year old, essay-length poem about the Nature of Things. To those conversant in Chinese, it should be obvious the book is really a compilation of sayings, aphorisms, and pieces of wisdom passed down in oral tradition.

Very little is known about Lao Tzu, its author. It is possible he was an older contemporary of Confucius (551-479 B.C.). He may also have been an archive keeper in one of the warring city-states of ancient China. Legend has it he grew tired of his work and decided to move on. Stopped at the border by a guard who recognized a man of wisdom, he was asked to put down his thoughts before departing. Lao Tzu penned his classic and strolled off into history. Even the meaning of his name is now disputed. The most likely translation is "The Old Master" or perhaps "The Old Boy" as in a southern "good old boy." What is certain is that he left a gemlike book, full of grace and wisdom.

The *Tao Te Ching* divides roughly into two parts. The first is mostly about spiritual wisdom while the second, seemingly addressed to political leaders and their advisers, centers on social issues. An important lesson to be drawn from the book is that

the character and beliefs of the people and their leaders are an integral part of good society and good government.

The teachings of the *Tao Te Ching* are available in many translations, but with one exception, I rely here on Stephen Mitchell's contemporary version. The wisdom of the Tao has also been applied to many disciplines: *The Tao of Leadership*, *The Tao of Physics*, and *The Tao of Pooh*. There is not yet a *Tao of Bush*. Making the *Tao Te Ching* required reading for President Bush could rescue the nation from the corruption, despair, and waste his administration has visited upon it.

On War

The Bush way was to initiate a war in Iraq which three years later shows no sign of abating. American military deaths in the war are over 2,200, and by the president's own admission, Iraqi civilian deaths exceed 30,000 with independent estimates as high as 100,000. The American occupation has brought civil war—not peace—to Iraq.

Instead of initiating a war, and then justifying it on discredited intelligence, what if the president had followed the path outlined in chapter 31 of the Tao. "Weapons are the tools of fear; a decent man will avoid them except in the direst necessity and, if compelled, will use them only with the utmost restraint. Peace is his highest value." And many

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translations of the Tao add this warning: “And anyone who delights in killing people will come up short in the world.”

Elsewhere, the Tao makes clear the wise leader only resorts to force to prevent aggression or to restore order. Even then, it should be no more than a temporary action. The wisdom of China is that something is wrong when military force becomes a permanent social need. War, by its very nature, puts a nation out of harmony with the Tao.

*When a country is in harmony with the Tao,
the factories make trucks and tractors.
When a country goes counter to the Tao,
warheads are stockpiled outside the cities.*

On Civil Liberties

The Bush way is to bypass the system of judicial supervision established by law and order a secret wiretapping program to monitor international calls by U.S. citizens suspected of links to al-Qaida. Arguing the U.S. Constitution gives him the right to do so, the president accuses those who leaked details of the clandestine spy program of “threatening national security.” No matter that past and present government officials confirm the volume of information harvested by National Security Agency eavesdropping is much larger than the White House admits.

Most recently, President Bush asserted he retains the right to authorize abuse of detainees under extreme circumstances, despite agreeing to legislation in December 2005 explicitly prohibiting such treatment. In a recent statement, the White House said it would construe a ban on “cruel, inhumane, and degrading” treatment in the defense spending bill “in a manner consistent with the constitutional authority of the president” and his powers as commander-in-chief.

The *Tao Te Ching* has strong advice in chapter 75 for those who would seek to stifle civil liberties.

*When taxes are too high,
people go hungry.
When the government is too intrusive,
people lose their spirit.*

*Act for the people’s benefit,
Trust them; leave them alone.*

Newly disclosed records also indicate counterterrorism agents at the Federal Bureau of Investigation have been conducting surveillance and intelligence-gathering operations involving advocacy groups active in causes as diverse as the environment, animal rights, and poverty relief.

Turning to the wisdom of the Tao, this time in chapter 17, “If you don’t trust the people, you make them untrustworthy.”

On the Imperial Presidency

The Bush way is to bristle over challenges to executive authority in the so-called war on terror. In the midst of the growing scandal created by the National Security Council’s wiretapping program, the Bush administration readily admits the decision to eavesdrop without warrants is part of a broader effort to reassert the powers of the presidency. The Tao way is to govern in moderation, following the will of the people.

*If you want to govern the people,
you must place yourself below them.
If you want to lead the people,
you must learn how to follow them (chapter 66).*

Chapter 68 adds in part, “The best leader follows the will of the people” while chapter 59 opens as follows, “For governing a country well there is nothing better than moderation.” Finally, chapter

60 begins, “Governing a large country is like frying a small fish. You spoil it with too much poking.”

On Fear

John Adams observed in his *Thoughts on Government* (1776) that “Fear is the foundation of most governments.” Taking this maxim to new heights, the Bush way is to trade on fear, invoking national security concerns to justify acts ranging from the invasion of Iraq to scrapping the Geneva Convention to spying on Americans. In his December 2005 Oval Office address, the president again suggested we had a choice between invading Iraq or risking a terrorist nuclear attack at home while fighting terrorists in Iraq meant we weren’t fighting them at home. On his secret program of spying on Americans, he implied we must make a choice between saving lives or following the law. Chapter 46 of the Tao concludes:

*There is no greater illusion than fear,
no greater wrong than preparing to defend
yourself
no greater misfortune than having an enemy.*

*Whoever can see through all fear
will always be safe.*

President Franklin D. Roosevelt reflected the Tao approach when he cautioned in his first inaugural address, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

On Tax Cuts for the Rich

The Bush way is to push through tax cuts for the wealthy and pay for them with cuts in Medicare, Medicaid, and student loans. The Tao way as found in chapter 53 is the center where things are in balance.

*When rich speculators prosper
while farmers lose their land;*

*when government officials spend money
on weapons instead of cures;
when the upper class is extravagant and
irresponsible
while the poor have nowhere to turn—
all this is robbery and chaos.
It is not in keeping with the Tao.*

A December 2005 study suggests working-age Americans earning \$50,000 to \$100,000 are two to six times more generous in the share of their investment assets donated to charity when compared to Americans earning more than \$10 million a year. This pioneering study of federal tax data was completed by the NewTithing Group, a San Francisco-based philanthropic research organization encouraging the most prosperous Americans to give more.

*People wearing ornaments and fancy clothes,
carrying weapons,
drinking a lot and eating a lot,
having a lot of things, a lot of money
Shameless thieves
Surely their way isn’t the way (Ursula LeGuin,
chapter 53).*

Religion and Government

The Bush way is to mix government and religion, pandering to the religious right and breaking down the division between church and state. The Tao way as found in chapter 72 is instructive.

*When they lose their sense of awe,
people turn to religion.
When they no longer trust themselves,
they begin to depend upon authority.*

*Therefore the Master steps back
so that people won’t be confused.
He teaches without a teaching,
so that people will have nothing to learn
(chapter 72).*

Conclusion

Can President Bush learn from the *Tao Te Ching*?
The Master is not optimistic.

*My teachings are easy to understand
and easy to put into practice.
Yet your intellect will never grasp them,
and if you try to practice them, you'll fail
(chapter 70).*

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