

*astrological-cultural-spiritual-political
views & commentary...*

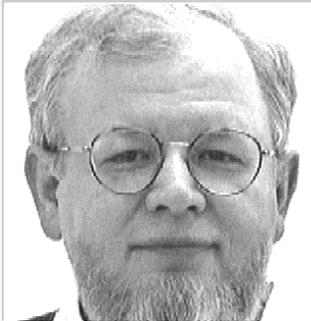
**Issue #61
Dec 2003**

THE HERBST NEWSLETTER



Thoughts, dates, & reminders about our lives as members of the craziest species on this lovely planet. Like a message in a bottle washing up on the sandy shores of consciousness...

website www.billherbst.com
email bill@billherbst.com
voicemail 612.207.4486



Dear friends,

December's commentary is the second in a series of essays about America's chart. The first (Newsletter #59, October 2003) focused entirely on a single aspect in that chart—the Sun-Saturn square. The essay explored one meaning of that difficult relationship, namely, the fundamental contradiction in our national psyche between inherited wealth and social equality. This month, I address another level of core symbolism by exploring the other major square between conflicted planets in the USA chart.

AMERICA: CHART AND SOUL **CONFLICTS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM**

Preface

In the chart most astrologers use for America (called the "Sibly" chart, named for the author of its first publication in 1776), two pairs of planetary conflicts predominate: the Sun in Cancer/8th house square to Saturn in Libra/10th, and Mars in Gemini/7th square to Neptune in Virgo/9th. Although the chart has many other compelling features, these two planetary pairs stand out in bold relief.

Both these planetary pairs are undergoing powerful transits in 2004-2005. Simultaneous activation of the symbols that represent our deepest conflicts has happened numerous times in the past two centuries, often at critical crossroads in American history. This is another such crisis, which I will write about in the months ahead. In the meantime, I'll continue setting the stage by discussing the natal meanings and their correspondences, not only to America's historical past, but to our present situation as well.

Part Two: Mars and Neptune in America's Chart

Every culture propagandizes to its own people. Every country tells its citizens over and over how good their lives are, how much their governmental, social, religious, and business institutions strive to provide for their needs and wishes. These implied promises—whether sincere and at least partially fulfilled or

empty and largely broken—are an essential part of maintaining group cohesion in national identity, as well as keeping “the people” in line and subservient to the powers that be.

No culture in history, however, has ever promised so much to its people as America. No country except America has ever promised EVERYTHING to its citizens by suggesting the possibility that ALL their needs, desires, and even fantasies should and can be fulfilled. No nation before ever had the audacity to do what America has done, to actually name its own propaganda, i.e., “The American Dream.”

Numerous positions in the USA chart contribute to this grandiose vision—Sagittarius rising, the Cancer Sun in the 8th house, Jupiter conjunct Venus in Cancer, Pluto in the 2nd opposed to Mercury in the 8th. Each contributes its special symbolism to an American vision reaching far beyond the limitations of other cultures. For boundless energy, unlimited desires, and sheer ballsy excess, however, none of those factors outshines Mars square Neptune.

Symbolic Meanings

At the moment of America’s symbolic birth (the signing of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia on July 4th, 1776, at 5:10 p.m. local time), Mars was in Gemini, in the western sky of the 7th house dipping toward the horizon, while Neptune was in Virgo, high in the 9th house, the most elevated planet in the sky. The two celestial bodies were located at nearly exact right angles from our perspective, tying them together in symbolism and amplifying their meanings..

Mars represents the kinetic, raw energy of muscular activity. It is also masculinity in general and male qualities of sexuality, such as the urgent passion of arousal and penetration. Mars further symbolizes missiles of all types, from thrown stones to shot arrows to launched rockets, and it defines the scale that moves from assertion through aggression to anger and finally violence through explosive potential. In general, Mars represents focused heat and desire, the urge to move beyond oneself and to invade other territories for conquest or acquisition. Hunting is classically Martian, although in postmodern civilization, hunting has largely given way to a more refined form of Martian activity—shopping and buying. Mars is extremely physical and concerns itself with tangible things.

Neptune, on the other hand, represents the wish for transcendence of ordinary life, with its physical separateness and defined sense of self, toward a blissful reunion with ultimate oneness. This is the urge to surrender the ego and lose oneself by immersing and dissolving into something larger and more grand. Thus, Neptune is mythic, associated with larger-than-life dreams and yearnings that transport us from the tangible to the intangible, and from the finite to the infinite—from ineffable spirituality or the all-consuming delicacy of romantic love through the illusions of Hollywood or the dissolution of drugs. True compassion and heartfelt spirituality are part of Neptune’s realm, as are cynical deception and confused self-delusion. The epiphanies of Neptune always leave questions lurking in the bushes: Is this real or is it a dream? Is it live or is it Memorex?

When these two contradictory symbols are connected in strong conflict, as in the USA chart, their meanings intertwine, but in ways that are often provocative and strange. All interplanetary connections in astrology, whether flowing or stressful, can manifest in both positive and negative ways, which are more situational than absolute. We cannot judge Mars square Neptune as inherently “good” or “bad.” Though this is admittedly a difficult alignment, context matters.

Among various public misconceptions about astrology is the assumption that charts show “strengths” and “weaknesses” that are neatly divided and separate. Yes, charts do reveal strengths and weaknesses, but those qualities are usually opposite sides of the same coin. A strength in one situation will be a weakness in another. If we embrace our strengths and talents too compulsively, we inadvertently activate our weaknesses and failings. That’s part of what makes human experience so rich and yet so frustrating.

Charismatic Energies

Especially with Mars in Gemini, the square from Neptune indicates that America’s collective will is easily galvanized, but with a relatively brief attention span, since our interest wanes quickly. Our brilliant ingenuity gives way to boredom. Putting men on the moon was a stunning achievement, but it turned out

to be disposable, as are so many of our social creations. American energy is incredibly diverse, but also embarrassingly superficial. Like crows flying over a cornfield, our attention is diverted and momentarily captivated by anything that glitters, whether it's truly gold or just a gum wrapper. And we are impatient. Americans want everything, and we want it NOW. That's why we love fast food. The lure of instant gratification is very strong.

Mars square Neptune indicates a powerful sense of charisma that is often downright magical. America reached into the wellspring of universal human longing and pulled out the keys to the kingdom. By and large, America has had the Midas Touch.

What we went after—and got—is (at least on the surface) what people have wanted throughout history. All the goodies. All the toys. By the mid-20th century, America had achieved much of the human wish list: Home ownership for an astonishing percentage of our population. A sense of safety and a government that seemed benign to most of its own citizens. A burgeoning middle class with an equitable distribution of wealth. Decent jobs. Good schools. Food in unbelievable abundance and availability, the kind of food that human beings crave—meat, fat, and sugar. Comfort food. Gluttony. Two chickens in every pot, and two cars in every garage. If America wasn't paradise, it was close enough for many.

The fact that these benefits were not enjoyed by all our population didn't diminish their magical effect. The fact that there were serious downsides, such as racial prejudice and the increasing alienation of suburban sprawl, could be swept under the rug back then. The world beat a path to our door anyway. People bought the fantasy of America. They came for political and religious freedom, certainly, but even more for wealth and the comforts it could buy. Never mind that America has always been more disturbed than they imagined. They came for The Dream.

History as Myth

Neptune was not discovered until 1846, so its symbolic influence on the American psyche didn't emerge until the mid-19th century. In the years from 1850-1890, however, the activation of Mars square Neptune in American cultural mythology was “set” or “cooked” like pudding. Those four decades were critical for America's masculine and spiritual self-images.

Developments in that 40-year period included the great westward expansion of “manifest destiny;” the aggressive conquest of indigenous AmerIndian cultures (hastened by our lust for gold and ever more land); the extolling of youthful vitality in the uniquely American attitude of “can-do” anything to which we set our minds and muscles; the foundation of a heavy industrial base in railroads, steel, oil, and armaments. American factories hummed like beehives in the second half of the 19th century, and our genius at manufacturing and building became the envy of the world for almost a century thereafter. Massive fortunes were made during the Gilded Age of the Robber Barons, presaging the rampant greed that has again infected and debased our national character in recent decades.

Perpetual War

The American Civil War (called in official archives “The War of the Rebellion”) ushered in the bloody epoch of modern warfare, with its unspeakable mass violence—in 1866, one-fifth of the entire state budget of Mississippi was spent on artificial limbs. The Civil War began as Mars in Gemini—boys thrilled to be playing soldiers. Once underway, Neptune expanded the conflict into a slaughterhouse. The tragedy that engulfed the nation is a classic negative manifestation of Neptune in the 9th house square Mars in the 7th—ethical ambiguity and moral confusion sparking violence against others.

In hindsight, both sides in the Civil War can be accused of cruel illegality. The South erred in defending the morally bankrupt institution of slavery, while the North failed to respect the ethical right of southern states to secede. The resulting holocaust ended slavery in America, but actually deepened the bitter hatreds of racism, and the wanton destruction—nearly a million casualties, with southern cities reduced to smoking ruins—left scars on the American soul that have not healed to this day.

Collectively, America is especially heir to deep wounds of victimhood when attacked. Witness the lasting traumas of Pearl Harbor and the 9-11 World Trade Center attacks. The former propelled us into World

War II and led to the Cold War, the military-industrial complex, and a defense budget that is now \$400 billion per year. The latter provoked an altogether wrong-headed retaliation by our striking out blindly with massive force. Getting even in confused revenge is not the same as solving the problem.

Our politicians may speak of Americans as a “peace-loving people,” but history belies that. We routinely claim to fight only when attacked, but the facts fail to support this contention. Since the end of World War II, the American military has been involved in approximately 200 “actions” around the world, according to a list compiled by the Federation of American Scientists. In 1947, historian Charles A. Beard coined a phrase for these ongoing military adventures that is eerily reflective of Mars-Neptune, calling our foreign policy “perpetual war for perpetual peace.”

We even declare war (Mars) on ideas (Neptune in the 9th). The War on Poverty in the 1960s, the seemingly endless and ongoing War on Drugs, and the more recent War on Terrorism are examples of American confusion in trying to fight our own shadows.

Domestically, America remains a culture enthralled with violence, in imagery even more than in fact. One has only to turn on the television or go to the movies to see how shamelessly Hollywood panders to our Neptunian obsession with Martian aggression. We have glamorized violence into an art form. Americans may give lip service to the good and decent “family values” of our Cancer Sun square Saturn in Libra, but we roll in the muck of imaginary screen violence like pigs in slop. Meanwhile, 8,000 very real nuclear warheads sit silently in underground silos, menacing the world. And yet, despite the technological sophistication of our extraordinary military might, we remained vulnerable and were undone by simple box-cutters. Such are the contradictions of Mars square Neptune.

Cowboys

The run of the cowboy was a brief, passing interlude in American history, hardly more than two decades, but it burned itself into our cultural mythology like a brand on cattle. The wide-open vistas of the American West are idealized Neptunian landscapes, and the cowboy with his six-shooter is the perfect Martian complement. The struggle between idealistic lawmen and villainous outlaws on an untamed frontier is a fitting metaphor for the square between those planets. John Wayne, Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and—most of all—the Lone Ranger and his Indian sidekick Tonto are truly American icons, along with their less exemplary but equally archetypal counterparts, Jesse James and Billy the Kid.

But the reality of the cowboy never mattered in Mars-Neptune symbolism. It’s the myth, and the conversion of that mythology into images. The “real” American west found its home in Hollywood, through movies and television. Now, more than a century after the closing of the frontier, the gunfight at the OK Corral has morphed into the spectacle of NFL football, the endless vistas of Monument Valley reappear in SUV ads, and the lone horse and cowboy rider on the plains have been replaced by truckers on the highways and tanks in the Iraqi desert.

Cars and Oil

That brings us to the internal combustion engine. In modern America, horsepower is under the hood rather than in the saddle. Our love affair with the automobile is probably the purest expression of Mars square Neptune. As a nation, Americans are restless. We love to travel, but with Mars-Neptune it’s not the destination that counts, but the trip itself. Movement is meaning. The Cancer Sun, Venus, and Jupiter in the USA chart may emphasize family and home, but Sagittarius rising and Mars-Neptune make that necessarily a mobile home. We live in our cars as much as in our houses.

One might reasonably ask why America has been so painfully reluctant to wean itself off oil and develop energy independence through alternative sources. In astrology, Neptune is fluids (most of all the oceans), but oil is particularly emphasized in Neptunian symbolism, since it represents the “return to oneness” in the breakdown and dissolution of organic matter. Our fascination with machinery and desire for movement (Mars in Gemini) is bound uncomfortably (square) to foreign oil (Neptune in the 9th house).

Remember, too, that Neptune represents drugs and addictions, so the case can be made that America is addicted to oil. That leads inevitably to an aggressive foreign policy (Mars in the 7th) aimed at control, if

not outright conquest, of countries where oil is plentiful. Sadly, that is a pact with the devil that may be America's undoing.

[Note: I'll write more in upcoming newsletters about these dangers and their possible resolution through Pluto's 2004-2005 passage over Mars-Neptune in the USA chart.]

Sex

America is divided over sex. We are deeply conservative, with Puritanical roots (Sun in the 8th house square Saturn in Libra), but Mars-Neptune exaggerates desire to the point of obsession. The reality of sex is overtaken by the universalization of sexual images and fantasies. As they say on Madison Avenue, sex sells.

With Neptune in the 9th house, America is morally ambiguous about sex. On the one hand, sex is idealized, and held to a high moral standard, especially in marriage (Mars in the 7th). On the other, sexuality is an arena of endless deceptions and lies, and sex scandals are still major events in this country. Witness President Clinton's impeachment.

Masculinity is exalted—in beefcake images of macho charisma—but also ridiculed—men are routinely portrayed as sexual adolescents and doofus husbands who chug beer and watch sports. Confusion over male sexuality has an aura of defensive paranoia. Witness America's continuing homophobia and the current hysteria over legalization of gay marriage.

Religion

If sex is universalized in America, religion moves in the opposite direction, toward spiritual materialism. And, as if it were not obvious, sex and religion are tied together very uncomfortably for Americans.

Rather than functioning as a means toward reunion and togetherness, spirituality provokes heated debate and social discord. America may be a melting pot of religious diversity, but that pot often boils over in conflict. Witness the seemingly irreconcilable turbulence around abortion in contemporary America, where both sides can claim valid spiritual justification for their entrenched positions.

The separation of church and state that is a hallmark of the Constitution is subtly undercut by Mars-Neptune. The rising political activism of the Christian right over the last 30 years should come as no surprise, for politics and religion have always been bedfellows in this country. For better or worse in America, the rule of law is more often the rule of belief.

Finally, we embrace a missionary zeal for our culture, ideas, and way of life. The notion of American exceptionalism—that we are protected to fulfill a special destiny—has always been seen as part of a divine plan to change the world. And indeed, the 20th century belonged to America, as our influence spread around the world.

The 21st century, however, is much less certain.



Bill Herbst resides in Minneapolis, Minnesota. To schedule an astrological session, either in-person locally or long-distance via telephone, send an email to bill@billherbst.com, or call 612-207-4486 and leave a voicemail.

© 2003, by Bill Herbst, all rights reserved.
Permission is granted by the author to copy and distribute or forward this PDF file via email.

Subscriptions to receive The Herbst Newsletter monthly via email are free and can be requested by sending an email to: newsletter@billherbst.com
Or go to Bill's website at www.billherbst.com and sign up there.
Donations are accepted with the author's gratitude.