

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

*Issue #62
Jan 2004*

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,

In recent newsletters, I discussed some of the meanings of the two dominant tensions in America's national birth chart. October's commentary focused on the Sun-Saturn square in the chart, with its conflicts between inherited wealth and social justice. December's newsletter explored the Mars-Neptune square, where desire and aggression are amplified by fantasy and myth.

The juxtaposition of these pairs of symbolic conflicts speaks volumes about American history, verifying much of our past and illuminating an uncertain future. This month's commentary concerns a central expression of those complex stresses.

AMERICA: CHART AND SOUL **III. CONSUMERISM AND SUSTAINABLE ECONOMICS**

If Mars square Neptune represents the "irresistible force" of endless human desires, while Sun square Saturn symbolizes the "immovable object" of real limitations, then America was set on a collision course from her very beginnings on July 4th, 1776.

The two primary conflicts in America's chart were destined to clash in a monumental struggle between the finite and the infinite—the dutiful necessity of social control, personal restraint, and measured denial versus the powerful wish for individual freedom, cultural excess, and immediate gratification. Careful balance or wild extremes. Less or more.

Each of these contradictory philosophies has its champions among modern Americans, and each camp has legions of followers. The majority of Americans, however, give lip service to the former (conservation) while embracing the latter (immediate gratification) in action and behavior.

When polled, Americans are overwhelming in favor of protecting the environment, but we want someone else to make the sacrifices required. Modern Americans expect government to do for us what we cannot or will not do for ourselves.

Our endless desires for more—a central theme of American history—have never been expressed more obviously than in the consumption-based economy we created over the past sixty years.

Another Look Back

America emerged from World War II as the world's sole unscathed superpower—a military-industrial-commercial juggernaut. Germany and Japan were totally devastated in defeat, England was exhausted, and our impending Cold War opponent, the Soviet Union, had lost 20 million people.

The automobile—beloved bastard child of the uneasy marriage between America's twin conflicts (Sun square Saturn and Mars square Neptune)—symbolized not only personal freedom, but collective economics. The geographic changes in American demographic mobility that had begun in the 1930s with massive road- and bridge-building projects resumed after the war. The late-1940s and early-1950s saw the systematic development of suburbs—Levittown, New York, being among the first and most famous. Parkways, turnpikes, and highways stretched out from the urban cities to service the relentless sprawl of suburbia. Construction of the interstate highway system begun under President Eisenhower was the most massive public works project ever undertaken in human history. With it came an unprecedented shift in American consciousness.

The rich had always been profligate in America, just as in every other culture throughout history. During the Gilded Age and after, Americans who made great fortunes in business, and then the scions who inherited those fortunes, put their unimaginable wealth on display in opulent mansions, such as William Randolph Hearst's 90,000-square-foot San Simeon in California or George Vanderbilt's 255-room Biltmore near Asheville, North Carolina. Such extravagance was nothing new.

What changed after World War II was the rest of America. The liberal policies of President Franklin D. Roosevelt did not end the Great Depression—the war did that for America—but FDR's New Deal did foster the creation of a burgeoning middle class, the likes of which civilization had never seen before. Distribution of wealth flowed down, and social mobility flowed up.

The New Deal had unintended consequences, however. The rise of big government was one. By itself, though, this is not significant; the federal government grew steadily throughout the 20th century, regardless of liberal or conservative administrations. More important was a new sense of entitlement. Americans began to look to the federal government not only to solve our problems, but to provide us with fulfillment of our desires.

America may have been seen as a paradise of unlimited resources, but the middle and lower classes had remained extremely frugal, reflecting both our Puritan roots and the hardy immigrant stock that poured in during the late-19th and early-20th centuries. The goal had always been a better life for one's children—remember, inherited wealth is the key to the American Dream.

That changed in the 1950s. America's collective vision began a subtle shift away from delayed gratification and saving for the future (Sun square Saturn) toward having it all NOW (Mars square Neptune). The work ethic was still strong, but Americans became increasingly unwilling to do without. Simultaneously (in a mutually reinforcing cause-effect symbiosis), economic planning moved away from its former emphasis on heavy industry toward parallel development of a consumer-based society of goods and services—not “hard goods” of necessity, but products of convenience and artificial luxury.

Only the rich could afford imported, hand-cut glass chandeliers in the entryways of their mansions, but nearly everyone could afford mass-produced, plastic chandeliers in their identical suburban ranch homes. Wealth could be universalized in a kind of ersatz luxury where the artificial was substituted for the authentic, and short-run profits for business could be maximized by emphasizing the disposable over the durable. Planned obsolescence replaced permanence. Image replaced substance. Formica replaced marble.

So America became a nation of consumers—rich and poor alike. Electricity and oil opened the door, and we strode through, grabbing more and more along the way. Ever since, we've pursued our dreams to have more, whether attainment of those dreams was within or beyond our means.

The Hard Facts

Americans consume more of the earth's limited resources than any other people on earth. To fuel the engine of an unsustainable business economy, our corporate agents plunder the natural environment with a ravenous appetite that is shocking to behold.

At current population levels, to provide food, fresh water, and all the resources we take from nature, the earth provides about four acres of productive land for each human being on the planet. On average, Americans presently consume 24 acres of productive land per person. And our staggering rate of consumption is going up, not down.

The meteor that ended the reign of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago was an unavoidable catastrophe. It was force majeure, an act of cosmic fate. In the past century, America became the modern equivalent of that meteor, spearheading an ecological disaster of similar if less obvious proportions—this time not by the hand of fate, but because of our own greed and insatiable desires. The sobering truth is that nearly one-third of all plant and animal species that existed on our planet a mere two centuries ago are now gone forever, with another third facing extinction by the end of the 21st century. We are killing them off.

Oil reserves have peaked and will decline rapidly. The struggle for control of dwindling fossil fuel reserves already impacts geopolitics dramatically. The coming scarcity will obviously affect our personal mobility in automobiles, but it will have much more drastic effect on conventional agriculture, which is dependent on fossil fuels for fertilizers, pesticides, farm machinery, and transport to market. Further threatening the food supply are worsening crises in clean water (from ground pollution and toxic waste) and the exhaustion of arable land (from overuse of fertilizers). The “miracle” of 20th-century agriculture that most of us in America take for granted may soon fade into memory.

We act as if natural resources were infinite. Alas, only our desires are infinite (Mars square Neptune); resources are all too finite. Once exhausted or ruined by toxicity, they are not easily replaced nor repaired. The blame for this state of affairs can hardly be placed squarely on America's shoulders, but with Sun square Saturn we should be taking the lead to correct it, and we have not done so. Our addictions to fossil fuels and all the other dubious consumer products of the marketplace are a looming tragedy of unprecedented proportions.

Nothing is sacred in American culture; everything has been commercialized, reduced to commodities for sale. Individually or in small groups, we find meaning where we can. Collectively, however, cynicism rules.

While I may sound like a Luddite, I accept that we must move forward, not back, toward a redefinition of progress. I understand all too well that the very real challenges of economic survival and maintaining (if only in illusion) decent standards of living for the masses are vexing problems indeed. Philosophical squabbles, incompetence, corruption, and messy compromises are all inevitable. Despite those difficulties, however, we could be making strides toward sustainability, if only the economic policies currently in vogue in America were not so incredibly stupid as to be the work of madmen.

To give just one example among many, the public commons are being “privatized,” a polite term for carving up and selling off to the highest bidder what little remains of our natural heritage, and for whatever selfish and smarmy purposes the new owners (usually huge corporations) deem fit. This is being accomplished with the aid of unconscionable double-speak in Washington, where both Republicans and Democrats sell their souls to special interests. The pillaging and looting that occurred recently in Iraq are nothing compared to the brazen theft that's going on right here in America.

This is not news. It has all been pointed out before. Toxic waste is not news. Global warming is no longer news. Destruction of the ozone layer and the melting of the polar ice caps is not news. Class warfare by the wealthy against everyone else is not news. And yet, not only are we Americans unable to focus our collective will on these outrages, we are continuing down a worsening path of foolish choices and myopic blindness where all of us will suffer the consequences.

Millions of Americans have spoken out in protest. Despite the constant seduction, the allure of commercial, political, and corporate siren songs of shameful propaganda, many of you who are reading this newsletter have done what you can as individuals to swim against the current. But we haven't stemmed the rising tide, and our levees are leaking badly. How many of us drive hybrid-fuel cars or use mass transit? How many of us buy only locally-grown food that is not processed or packaged? How many of our homes use electricity generated by wind or solar power? Precious few. So the problem is not simply the idiots in power. Most Americans are complicit.

I have no brilliant solutions to offer. Purity of heart, compassionate conscience, and choosing love over fear are laudable spiritually and always well-advised, but such goodness tends to occur within selected individuals and is unlikely to stop the careening juggernaut of collective overconsumption. As for relying on the intelligence and wisdom of those in power, I have little faith in government, and none at all in the voluntary marketplace.

Coming to our senses will not be easy. Human beings have always been largely selfish and shortsighted. The Plains Indians of North America have been resurrected in our mythology as examples of more sacred cultures that lived in closer harmony to the earth. In reality, however, Indians depleted their environments just as we do. When their local ecosystems were barren of game or fouled with waste, the Plains Indians simply packed up and moved on. Where are we to move?

A sane perspective toward sustainable management of resources is not part of our genetic or cultural heritage. That's why this problem is so hard to wrap our minds around. We must, however, or Americans will soon be forced to make sacrifices that are currently unthinkable.

What's occurring now in the heavens may have some impact. For the next two years, both difficult squares in America's chart—Sun square Saturn and Mars square Neptune—are activated by major transits that have potent implications.

Over the coming months in this newsletter, I will discuss the possibilities of those transits, both for better and for worse.

One way or another, America is going to change.



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.

© 2004, 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.