

A comparison of the teachings of lao tzu and the american political philosophy

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Comparing Lao Tzu's idealistic teachings with the American political philosophy characterized by materialism and realism is a difficult task. Yet, there are similarities that could be extracted. To compare and contrast the two, the following categories were examined: (1) government intervention and control over its people, (2) order maintenance, and (3) display of a nation's power. Based on these categories, it could be inferred that Lao Tzu's teachings are compatible the U. S. government intervention and control over its people, but in contrast to Lao Tzu's view on maintaining order and displaying a nation's power.

Lao Tzu believes that the best way to govern is to act in the shadows and practice prudent inaction. This implies that the leader of a country should rule with minimal intervention, interceding with the lives of the people only when necessary. The more the government tries to control the people and oppress them, the more miserable and devious they become. Imposing strict laws entice more people to break them. " Stop trying to control... /and the world will govern itself. / The more prohibitions you have, / the less virtuous people will be" (57: 35-36)... / " If a country is governed with repression, / the people are depressed and crafty" (58: 38).

Conversely, if a government rules without interfering with the lives of its people, it allows them to achieve good things for themselves. " The Master doesn't talk, he acts. / When his work is done, / the people say, " Amazing: we did it, all by ourselves! " (17: 6). Given Lao Tzu's positive view on government intervention and negative view on oppression, he would probably approve of the current form of our government. As a democratic

state, the government does not oppress its people and does not intervene with their daily lives.

The people are free from the government's control in terms of how they want to live their lives. For instance, we are given the liberty to choose which career to pursue, where to live, what to wear, what religion to practice (or not practice religion at all). Nevertheless, situations arise wherein the government needs to intercede. For example, the government established the police force to protect the people from being harmed and being treated unfairly. However, considering Lao Tzu's view on the practices of a wise ruler, the U. S. politicians fall short of his expectations.

The politicians always inform the people of their achievements to let the citizens know what they have done to serve the country, and use them for their campaigns to win the constituents' votes. Lao Tzu's ideals also stress the importance of eradicating the desire for power and wealth. When a person or object is considered as higher than the others, it instigates the desire to obtain the "higher" person's status or the highly valuable object. Thus, they become objects of envy, causing people to steal or contend for power. "If you overesteem great men, / people become powerless. / If you overvalue possessions, / people begin to steal"(3: 1).

Thus, to maintain order, a wise ruler helps the people to let go of their desires and knowledge. Instead, he or she fills their stomach and "toughens their resolve" (3: 2). Lao Tzu writes, "When there is no desire, all things are at peace" (37: 24). As a state that promotes progress, the U. S. government is the complete opposite of Lao Tzu's beliefs about how order is maintained.

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Rather than inhibit personal desires and the thirst for knowledge and ambition, the government promotes them. The U. S. has become a powerful country as a result of its desire for improvement and prosperity.

The government and corporations have invested on technological advancement, lucrative businesses and education for the acquisition of resources and for national and individual progress. For most people, material quest is the road to survival and happiness. They desire stylish, comfortable houses, designer clothes, the latest technology, and luxury cars. Most of them also aim to climb up the social ladder to become a part of the high society. To keep the peace and order of the country, the government helps the citizens to achieve their dreams by providing free education.

It helps the people to secure their treasures and valuables by implementing laws to prevent incidents of theft. Based on Tao Te Ching, it could also be inferred that Lao Tzu despises violence and war. " There is... no greater misfortune than having an enemy" (46: 31). He believes that a wise leader considers peace as his highest priority. Wars should be avoided at all costs. A nation should resort to using weapons only in the " direst necessity" (31: 20). Weapons of war induce fear among the people and cause chaos, as they imply that the country needs to defend itself from another country or some outside force.

A wise leader also does not need to prove his power to anyone as he is already powerful (38: 25). Similarly, a powerful nation does not need to display its power by accumulating weapons. Lao Tzu observed that despite the vastness of the sea, it remains " lower" than the streams flowing to it

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and used this concept to depict the humility a powerful nation should have (61: 47). Likewise, no matter how powerful a country becomes, it must stay humble. It also does not interfere with the affairs of other countries because for Lao Tzu, this is an implication of display of power (61: 49).

The participation of U. S. in the cold war is incongruent to Lao Tzu's thoughts on display of power. As a hegemonic state, the U. S. developed and accumulated nuclear weapons in an effort to defend or prevent itself from being attacked by the equally powerful Soviet Union. After the World War II, the U. S. was also the main organizer of a world organization to avoid the occurrence of further wars, to prevent powerful countries from conquering poor countries, and to provide financial aid to poor countries. This is in contrast to Lao Tzu's view of a great nation.

He does not believe that meddling in other nation's affairs is a good thing. This is understandable as during the period where Lao Tzu lived, the concept of world organizations that are not under the rule of any nation is inconceivable. In conclusion, although most of Lao Tzu's teachings oppose the American political philosophy, some of its characteristics live out the teachings of Lao Tzu. The government policy on intervention with people's lives is in line with Lao Tzu's teachings, as it respects individual freedom and governs with minimal intervention.

On the other hand, the teachings of Lao Tzu clash with the government policies on maintaining order and displaying of power. To maintain order, instead of eradicating desire for power and wealth, the government promotes them for progress and prosperity. The politicians also inform the

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public of what they have achieved in service of the country, instead of practicing prudent inaction. Finally, Lao Tzu's sentiment on display of power challenges the practice of the U. S. government during the cold war, wherein they accumulated powerful weapons in an effort to prevent the country from being attacked.