

On Deciphering Ameriglish as a Cultural Tool (Part Five)

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This article, the fifth about how contemporary Ameriglish provides insights into mainstream America,¹ treats selected items of vocabulary having to do with government and politics.

The previous essay in this series addressed the topic of “law” in the United States and concluded with an analogy to insinuate that “Law” is a powerful deity which provides spiritual substance for American society. Whether something is permissible in America depends on whether “the law” allows it, does not allow it, or does not allow it, and this has become an approach to life which nearly everybody in the country agrees to, by choice or by force of circumstance, and whoever tries to operate “outside” the law often enough ends up “inside” one of the great god’s facilities for correction. “Law,” however, is metaphysical – a compendium of manipulated language that represents ideas – so it is up to people themselves to bring “Law” to life within their society, that is to make it manifest in physical reality. The institutions which are responsible for this are known as governments, which comprise among other things the police forces and courts that were mentioned in the previous essay, and the process which leads to creating, enforcing, and interpreting laws is politics. Attention has therefore been shifted in this article to government and politics, with the main objective being to explain important vocabulary dealing with government in general, the branches and some of the institutions of the federal government, the basic structure of the state governments, and the mainstream political parties and how they tend to be classified.

“Government” might not be the most spoken-about topic in the United States, but it ranks rather highly within the mass media and it often seems that people in government – politicians and, perhaps less so, bureaucrats and other agents – would like for Americans to show a greater interest in it and its machinations than most are perceived to do. Yet, for most people in America, it would seem that government is

an industry of trouble, something which brings bother to life by interfering with the flow of events and the pursuit of desires and by diminishing the rewards accrued from efforts to survive and even to advance materialistically in life. In America, and especially when outside its various ivory towers, it is not at all uncommon to encounter rather negative feelings about “the government,” at least one of its institutions, and/or at least one of its members or sets of personnel, and at the root of these sentiments are such things as government taking a cut from personal income, laws being made and enforced which encroach upon the ability of individuals to make decisions for themselves, the image of “the government” being a notorious means to suppress freedom, and disagreements with policies and ideas emanating from whoever is in power or would like to be in power. Sometimes the complaints about government are well founded, but at other times they are in a gray zone or even questionable from the point of view of validity, giving the impression that “the government” is a term which can apply to a specified institution as well as to a scapegoat that might not even exist. The first two definitions given for “the government” in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary*² take this into account and, to keep some flexibility of mind, ought to be recalled whenever a discussion is initiated in America, and sometimes even with an American elsewhere, about “the government”:

[1] an institution which is imaginary or not imaginary but which makes life difficult by interfering with the ordinary course of affairs, a specified or implied institution which is into control and can make life difficult for somebody or anybody or everybody.

The third definition for “the government,” though, goes beyond registering the frustrations of many people in or from America and explains its objectives:

[2] a specified or implied institution which does such things as make and enforce and interpret laws and discuss and create policies and try to regulate society or lead it in a particular direction.

It is, of course, in the spirit of item [2] that the remainder of this essay is written.

An important principle in American governance, from the national level to the local community, is that of “limited government.” This is explained in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* to be

[3] a theory according to which a polity or political institution is somehow able to control itself or to be restrained by its own people so that it doesn’t get too powerful.

Although it is difficult to pinpoint the articulated origin of this concept, it is fair to say that it existed in English North America from the establishment of Virginia in 1607, and a major factor in the lead-up to the War for Independence (1775-81) was an

intrusion by the British government into colonial affairs, most notably through new taxation which a substantial number of influential colonists considered to be unfair. In the sixth year after the end of hostilities, and with the possibility of the coalition of thirteen states becoming undermined by weak parliamentary governance, what has come to be known as the Constitutional Convention took place in Philadelphia; this was a revolution of sorts which led to the Constitution for the United States of America (1787) and, a few months after the requirements for ratification had been met, the institutional creation of the republic in 1789. Even if the new government from its inception was to be stronger (less limited) than that under the Articles of Confederation which were in effect from 1781 into 1789, the so-called “Founding Fathers” did nevertheless try to establish a form of government which was to keep to the spirit of being “limited.” Two directly related concepts are the “separation of powers” and “checks and balances,” being explained respectively in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* as

[4] the concept that the three branches of government (legislative and executive and judicial) should be sufficiently independent of each other that no one branch can inappropriately influence another or get too much power; [and]

[5] the system of overlapping responsibilities which are detailed in the United States Constitution to make it difficult for any one of the three branches of government to get too much power.

A further check, at least in theory, was envisioned to be provided by the people themselves, as suggested by the anecdote about Benjamin Franklin coming out of the Constitutional Convention and answering a question about what kind of government America was getting with “a republic, if you can keep it.” Such a comment obviously meant that a responsibility had been placed on the people, but from the very beginning the republic was not intended to be a true democracy – it has always been a “representative democracy” – and it ought to be noted that over the course of time seldom has the sociopolitical situation in America been bad enough to test the commitment of the people.

For what has become known as the “federal government,” the institution which has overseen and kept together the entire country, those who participated in the Constitutional Convention created three branches of government. Article I of their Constitution covers the legislative branch which represents the people and the states in separate parts, Article II covers the executive branch which represents the entire country, and Article III provides brief coverage of the judicial branch which is supposed to make sure that the spirit of Law breathes justly throughout the land; a

variety of overlapping duties were written into the text so that tensions and compromises would evolve and, at least theoretically, put a damper on the aspirations of any one person, group of people, or branch of government to acquire powers which might become too strong, if not even dictatorial or absolutist. The “checks and balances” which were woven into the fabric of the Constitution have often enough led to “gridlock” – “a condition in which little or nothing of consequence gets done because the competing parties can’t come to an agreement to get something done” in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* – but although politicians and political lay people might complain about it, that is one of the outcomes of a system which was designed to make sure that change would not come about in an abrupt, dangerously controversial way.

The presidency is the subject of the second article of the Constitution, yet it is the branch which garners the most attention and has obviously been the one most closely linked to concerns about the concentration of power. The *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* explains the “presidency” to be

[6] the federal institution which is entrusted with executive powers that include such things as enforcing federal laws and participating in certain ways in the legislative process and overseeing the military and which is headed by the president of the United States of America.

And the same dictionary notes that “the president” is

[7] a person who serves as the head of the executive branch of the federal government which includes playing the roles of head-of-state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces and pretending to be the most powerful person on Earth.

The original *Ameriglish Dictionary*,² however, refers to the president as “an ephemeral monarch,” a tongue-in-cheek observation which alludes to the office having been created so that instead of having a king or similar royal figure, America could still have one person who, over a limited amount of time, would symbolize the entire country and be the final decision-maker in such things as war-making. Although a presidential term is stated in the Constitution as being four years, Article II did not place a restriction on the number of terms a president could serve, and presidents until Franklin Roosevelt (r. 1933-45) followed George Washington’s (r. 1789-97) informal precedent of serving no more than two terms; Amendment 22 (ratified in 1951) of the Constitution was passed in the aftermath of Roosevelt’s election to a fourth presidential term to limit a president formally to two plus, in the event of an in-term succession, up to half of a predecessor’s term. Electing a president is a national project, which in the last couple of generations of television power

has become a series-type drama lasting at least a year, and it involves candidates presenting their arguments to try to win votes in first-stage party elections known as caucuses and primaries in each state, campaigning throughout the country by the formally nominated candidates and debates between the (usually two) main opponents, voting over the course of one day by properly registered citizens who for one reason or another would like their opinion to be counted, tabulating the results in each state so that the combined will of the interested citizens and the states might be plugged into a mathematical formula which determines votes in the Electoral College, the Electoral College meeting throughout the country about a month later and (if faithful) submitting votes according to the mathematical formula and state laws, and – just over two weeks before the new presidential term is to begin on January 20 – the vice president opening a sealed envelope with the formal result from the Electoral College to declare who will be the next president. Apparently an enigmatic institution to most people in the United States, the “Electoral College” is not a place for higher education but – in the spirit of a “college” being a society of informed people – a temporary set of people selected for a solemn task, as noted in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary*:

[8] a group of people corresponding in number and according to the distribution of members of Congress plus three more for the District of Columbia who meet in state capitals and the city of Washington in the December following a presidential election in November to cast the votes which will officially determine who will become president in the following January.

For at least several presidential election cycles by now, the Electoral College has come to be treated as an anachronism, and whoever loses on “election day” in November usually concedes at that point so that the informal winner can prepare for assuming office, or continuing in the case of a reelection, in January.

There are many duties for the president – including acting as head of state, participating in the legislative process, and overseeing the enforcement of federal laws – as well as such political activities as trying to create a national mindset for the socioeconomic direction of the country, but at some time after atomic bombs were invented and first used in 1945, many Americans have come to see their president as “the most powerful man in the world.” Although such imagery might have made the Founding Fathers cringe, it is related to the president’s being the “commander-in-chief” of the American armed forces and having the final decision about whether to use weaponry from the American nuclear stockpile; that such weapons have not been used since August 1945 and that the United States has not fared too well in

wars since then, however, suggest that this rhetoric does not pass muster. There are other ways to demonstrate that the American president cannot be the most powerful person in the world, including the checks on the presidency via the legislative and judicial branches, the most threatening of which is the possibility of impeachment and, after a trial in the Senate which arrives at a “guilty” verdict, removal from office for politically adjudged misbehavior. Another example is that quite often a president in his seventh and eighth years in office becomes a “lame duck,” which the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* explains to be

[9] a president who is weak because [his] term is running out and a sufficient percentage of Congress can frustrate whatever that president wants to do.

Furthermore, a president is not expected to be omniscient and capable of making competent decisions on his own, so there is a network of advisors and assistants – most notable of whom are the members of the “cabinet” which serve as links between the president and the various federal bureaus – who provide information and ideas for further action. Another important assistant to the president is the “vice president,” explained in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* as

[10] the person who serves as the back-up to the president of the United States and who must be prepared to undertake the president’s duties in the case of the president not being able to do them and who must be prepared to become president if the president dies or is removed from the presidency.

That a recent vice president was the *éminence grise* behind a “wartime” president and, more so, that a recent candidate for vice president was incredulously ignorant and ill-prepared for national office – and therefore easily manipulated if she would have been vice president or, upon upgrade because of unfortunate circumstances, president – suggest quite strongly that at least some powerful people within one of the two major political parties do not see the president as the most powerful person on the planet. Other forces must be at work, so perhaps it would be reasonable to think of whoever is serving as “POTUS” – the president of the United States – as a terribly underpaid actor, not as “the most powerful man in the world.”

Moving on to the legislative branch, the United States does not have a parliament by that name, but rather it has a “Congress,” the successor of the Continental Congresses which convened during the War for Independence and the first manifestation of the United States under the Articles of Confederation in the 1780s. Since its inauguration in 1789 according to the guidelines established in the Constitution, the United States Congress has been a bicameral legislature, with the “House of Representatives” and the “Senate” having taken on the airs of a lower house and an

upper house respectively. In the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary*, these two houses or chambers are respectively, and briefly, explained to be

[11] the chamber of the United States Congress which represents the people living in or otherwise having a meaningful and legal attachment to the United States; [and]

[12] the chamber of the United States Congress which represents the states.

The House of Representatives (item [11]) comprises 435 members, each of whom is properly referred to as a “representative” but, for some curious reason, often gets called a “congressman” or a “congresswoman” according to physiological sex; each member of “the House” is elected to represent a single-seat district which was determined according to population within a state, and the number of representatives from a state is based on the state’s population vis-à-vis that of the entire country as determined every ten years by a national census. Within the House of Representatives, the highest office is that of “Speaker,” who serves as the equivalent of a prime minister, tries to complement or to foil the much more famous president as circumstances unfold, and would be upgraded to president in the event that the president and vice president vanish from office either simultaneously or in rather quick succession; given the gravity of the office, then, it is not surprising that the position of Speaker has been held by longtime loyalists of the party which holds the “majority” in the chamber. The other chamber of Congress, the Senate (item [12]), comprises two “senators” from each state for a total of 100 members, a total number which changes according to the number of states; each state has a “senior” and “junior” senator, determined by length of tenure, and both represent the entire state. One reason that the Senate tends to be considered as an upper parliamentary house is that the senators have longer terms (six years) than the representatives (two years) and can therefore concentrate more on issues facing the country as a whole, rather than constantly worrying about pleasing constituents to get reelected; another is that based on the number of members in the two chambers, and given that both the Senate and the House of Representatives somehow have to agree for a piece of legislation to be enacted, the vote of a senator is 4.35 times more powerful than that of a representative.³ An important point for understanding why the United States Congress has its bicameral structure is that, for the country to be formed effectively from the coalition of thirteen former British colonies, it was necessary to provide a forum not just for the interests of the people but also for the interests of the so-called states – unequal in territory, population, and economic prospects – which did not necessarily have to join the new federation.

Article I, the longest of the articles in the Constitution, establishes Congress as the law-making institution for the whole country and provides details about how this is done as well as its scope of legislative powers. Although both the presidency – mainly via participating in the legislative process and the power to veto a bill – and the federal courts serve as checks on Congress, it is the latter which plays the more intellectual role of interpreting laws and can even determine whether an existing law is not valid under the Constitution. Article III, which is the shortest of the articles about the three branches of national government, refers to “one supreme court” and “inferior courts” to be established (but not controlled) by Congress; today these are collectively known as the “federal courts,” which the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* defines as

[13] the District Courts and Appellate Courts and the Supreme Court of the United States which are all under the auspices of the national government and which deal with legal cases affecting the whole country or more than one state.

The district courts are those of first resort in the “federal” system and examine cases for facts and arguments, determine whether guilt or wrongdoing exists, and provide remedies when applicable, while the appellate courts are courts of appeals which look into “federal” cases in which an important error might have been made in the district court. In the event that controversy still exists after an appellate court has made a decision on a case with national merit, the case can be appealed to the United States Supreme Court or, as entered in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* to reflect its common name, the Supreme Court which is

[14] the highest legal institution which decides cases of national interest that have been brought to it through the federal system of courts or a state system of courts.

It should be noted that cases originating in a state judiciary can be heard by the Supreme Court, but that cases originating in the federal judiciary cannot be heard by a court in a state system, thereby putting the Supreme Court at the apex of American jurisprudence. Cases which are appealed to the Supreme Court are generally not granted an automatic hearing, but are subject to being chosen by the court from a host of petitioned cases each year. The people who choose which cases to hear, are involved in examining those cases which are chosen, and issue decisions about the cases are known as “justices,” explained (via the entry for “justice”) in the same dictionary as

[15] the nine members of the Supreme Court who could be involved in making legal or constitutional decisions affecting the whole country.

“Could be” is included in the explanation because each member does not necessarily

participate in every case, although a nine-justice decision is by far the rule rather than the exception. Cases are decided by a simple majority vote, and in the event of a tie (e.g. four to four with one justice not having participated), the previous ruling from the appellate court stands; the decision-making process involves not just the justices who eventually vote, but also their clerks who do a lot of the research, and any one case could have up to three different types of learned opinion – majority, concurring, and dissenting – written up for the public record, the most important usually being the majority opinion which explains why the Supreme Court arrived at a particular decision. That there are nine justices is something which was determined not by the Constitution, but rather by the Judiciary Act of 1869, and it appears unlikely that the number is going to change, as Franklin Roosevelt discovered when he unsuccessfully tried to have the court increased to fifteen justices in the 1930s. Selection of a justice is a political process in which the president nominates a candidate, usually based on ideological sympathy and a record as a judge within the federal system, and the Senate examines the merits of the nominee and makes a decision by a majority vote, approval putting the candidate on the court and disapproval making the president choose another to be examined and voted on. Once a justice has been placed “on the bench” of the Supreme Court, that person has a job until death, chosen retirement, or (most unlikely) forced removal for misbehavior.

Another component of the federal government is the “bureaucracy,” which is not a branch per se but an intricate network of organizations that often comes across as a bothersome, despised, and even predatory creature, as noted in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary*:

[16] a somewhat mysterious institution of government which is notorious for making life difficult for regular or ordinary or normal people.

Somebody who works for one of the organizations within this “mysterious institution” is known as a “bureaucrat,” which the same dictionary observes to be “popularly” thought of as

[17] a person who works for the government and who might be considered to be obnoxious or evil or at least does not work in the better interests of regular or ordinary or normal people.

Bureaucrats, then, do most of the dirty work of government, and although many Americans might complain about the “bureaucracy” and “bureaucrats” in the abstract, it must be said that many bureaucrats are actually personally liked, a couple of examples being most post-office workers and national-park rangers. Still, the image of “bureaucracy” and “bureaucrats” is often enough not a pleasant one, as

exemplified by the discomfort which is likely to arise upon hearing such alphabetic constructs as “T.S.A.,” “the F.B.I.,” and “the I.R.S.” Respectively, these are the “Transportation Security Administration,” the “Federal Bureau of Investigation,” and the “Internal Revenue Service” which are explained in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* to be

[18] an organization which is run by the federal government and entrusted with inspecting people who are intending to board an aircraft and luggage and other items that are going to be put on an aircraft to make sure that nobody or nothing can get on an aircraft which could cause the aircraft to be hijacked or damaged or destroyed;

[19] the organization which tries to find out all sorts of things that are or could be happening inside the United States and that are or could be considered to be of significant or vital interest to the federal government; [and]

[20] the agency of the federal government which is responsible for collecting taxes that are based on income.

The last bureau, which is under the auspices of the United States Department of the Treasury and epitomizes the idea that “the government” is an “institution which is into control and can make life difficult for somebody or anybody or everybody” (item [1]), has become notorious as “America’s Gestapo” because of its ability to collect financial details about anybody having anything to do with the United States as well as its ability to threaten people over tax-related issues.⁴ Two other agencies which have earned references to the Gestapo are the F.B.I. and the United States Department of Homeland Security – the latter of which includes the T.S.A. and was created in 2002 ostensibly to prevent terrorist attacks in and on the United States in the aftermath of “Nine Eleven” – but most parts of the federal bureaucracy do not warrant such a sensational comparison. In fact, many other agencies and such like are not even known by most Americans, although for one personal reason or another a good number of them are vaguely familiar with at least one federal organization. One bureau which seems to be rather admired, especially since the war for Kuwait in 1991, is the Department of Defense, which runs the various components of the military that registers fondly in the heart of all “patriots”; it may also be said that another bureau has a somewhat romantic image stemming from its derring-do and secrecy, this being “the C.I.A.” or the “Central Intelligence Agency” which is explained in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* as

[21] the organization which tries to find out all sorts of things that are or could be happening outside the United States and that are or could be considered to be of significant or vital interest to the federal government of the United States.

People who work for organizations within the national bureaucracy are referred to not only as “bureaucrats” but also as such things as “feds” (from “federal agents”) and “g-men” (from “government men”); they are hired under various conditions, for various tenures, and without any say on the part of “the people,” in whose service they have purportedly been employed to devote their working time.

The United States is a “federal republic,” which in this case means that there are two important types of government potentially subjected to stressful coexistence. In the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary*, a “republic” is noted to be “a type of polity or government which does not have a monarch,” while the relevant definition for “federal” is

[22] referring to a union which involves a national government and governments of other entities that are in varying degrees subordinate to or dependent on the national government.

Typically, a country with a presidential system qualifies as a “republic,” and the “Founding Fathers” of the United States can be seen to have established this precedent for other countries which, in their own ways, are or have been republics.⁵ In America, as explained earlier in this essay, the presidential system is found in the national government which has come to be known as the “federal government” – in the sense that “federal” means “of a union” – and this government keeps the whole country together as a unity. Complementing this government are the less glamorous, yet constitutionally important and certainly very significant within their own territorial jurisdictions, state governments. A “state government,” as defined in the same dictionary, is

[23] an institution in one of the fifty major political divisions of the United States which does such things as make and enforce and interpret laws and discuss and create policies that are or will be applicable within the area of its jurisdiction.

“One of the fifty major political divisions” refers to a “state” such as Vermont, Michigan, Kansas, Alabama, Wyoming, or California which might come across to people who are not familiar with American history, political geography, and government as the equivalent of an administrative province, but which actually enjoys considerable freedom in its own affairs and sometimes can be at odds with the national government. Each of these “major political divisions” has its own “constitution” and tripartite government, which incorporates the ideas of “limited government,” “separation of powers,” and “checks and balances” and is thereby run in the same spirit as the national government; the important generic components of a state government are the “governor,” the “state legislature,” and the “state courts”

which respectively are explained in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* as

[24] the chief political executive of an American state;

[25] the part of the government in one of the fifty major political divisions of the United States which is entrusted to make laws that are to be applicable within the area of its jurisdiction; [and]

[26] a set of places which belong to the government of one of the fifty major political divisions of the United States and which administer justice and try to make sure that the laws within their areas of jurisdiction are properly interpreted and applied.

How a person becomes a governor, state legislator, or judge on a court within the state system is determined by each state – not by national legislation – but popular elections are the most common, even for most judgeships, and the best known person in a state government tends to be the governor.

Although the United States Constitution and the state constitutions outline respectively a national government and their state governments, they do not specify a political ideology which might establish a paradigm for such things as structuring American society and running its economy. Many things have changed since the republic was established in 1789, but throughout its history the United States has enjoyed the reputation of being a “democracy,” which comes across in everyday American discourse to mean

[27] a vague political philosophy or entity which seems to emphasize free markets and capitalism and to be against dictatorships.

This definition in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* is followed by another, with the qualification of “originally perhaps”:

[28] a form of government in which the people of a country were important enough that their sentiments and such like were to be respected to the extent that the people running the country actually had to do more than just pay lip service to them.

Item [28] obviously raises the question of what has become the role of “the people” in the government of the United States, an interesting topic which is beyond the scope of this essay. Still, it is worthwhile noting that the same book defines “the people,” as an abstract concept, as “a group of people which is often talked about by politicians and others who are interested in political or social issues,” and that other than defining a “person” (the singular form of “people”) as “a human being,” it points out that a “person” can be

[29] anything so construed or defined in order to consider its activities to be those of a human being.

The latter is a legal concept, but it is relevant for understanding the current form of democracy in the United States, in which the most influential “persons” are big

businesses and such like “who” can pay handsome sums of money to politicians for various purposes. It would seem that it is this type of “person” which over many decades has been behind formulating the de facto definition of “democracy” given above as item [27].

One criterion that is often used to distinguish a “democracy” from a “dictatorship” is the number of political parties which participate in government or legitimately aspire to. The expression “one-party dictatorship” tends to have negative, even sinister overtones, and a government which has been run by the same party for decades can be viewed with suspicion, as if some form of dictatorship exists or is in the making. Hence, two or more reasonably competitive parties are generally required for a country to be acclaimed “democratic,” and there are many countries – especially in Europe – which do have at least two parties with significant ideological differences that give people ample reason to pay attention and to vote in their better interests. In the case of the United States, it is true that there are two major political parties – the Republicans and the Democrats – yet what are taken to be ideological differences often resemble competing solutions to problems or alternative opinions on issues which have been put forth by politicians with similar core values. In this context, it is tempting to argue that the two major parties are less parties than factions of a larger entity which could be called “the Patriotic Capitalist Judeo-Christian Republican Democrats” (for those who like letter clusters, PCJCRD).⁶

Still, the two main parties in the United States since the end of the Civil War in 1865 have been the “Republicans” and the “Democrats,” which tend to be described respectively as being on the “right” and the “left” of American politics. The Republicans are perhaps the more interesting, if for no other reason than their party having bordered periodically on sufficient dysfunction since ca. 1996 (the year that Senator Bob Dole lost the presidential election) that its future existence has sometimes been questioned. In the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* the “Republican Party” is defined as

[30] one of the two mainstream political parties in the United States and which seems to prefer the free market and a very limited role for the federal government in society and which seems to be in love with the American military.

It is often referred to as the “G.O.P.” (usually “GOP”), or the “Grand Old Party,” a nickname that suggests a dignified history and a claim to seniority. This is bolstered by its being considered the “conservative” party in the United States and favored these days by most people who fancy themselves to be a “conservative,” which according to the same dictionary is

[31] a person who claims or pretends to uphold American traditions handed down

from the Founding Fathers but who seems to be more interested in being in a controlling position in society or emphasizing patriotism or making money through capitalism and the free market or giving the military opportunities to exercise itself or appearing to be tough or somehow combining such things.

Over the last two decades or so, this image has been cultivated by the so-called “neoconservatives” – “neocons” for short – who have taken over the G.O.P. and, as the dictionary notes,

[32] try very hard to force their agenda of making oil companies and wealthy people more rich and influential and of making lower-class and middle-class people poorer and of causing trouble throughout the world so that America can expand its network of military bases in order to secure a relatively cheap and continuous supply of oil for generations to come.

Perhaps the most influential of the “neocons” has been the *éminence grise* behind the presidency of George Bush the Younger (r. 2001-09), but these radicals are foiled to some degree within their own party by the “paleoconservatives,”⁷ a term which suggests an old-fashioned form of political tradition, and one which might be thought of outside the United States at least as less volatile. Opposing the Republicans are the Democrats, members of the Democratic Party, noted in the same dictionary to be

[33] one of the two mainstream political parties in the United States and which seems not to be too fond of a very free “free market” but would like for the federal government to play a rather meaningful role in society and which seems to love the American military to a slightly lesser extent than does the Republican Party.

The Democrats have willingly or not assumed the mantle of being the “liberal” party, and according to the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* a “liberal” is

[34] somebody who wants to make life easier or more meaningful for people as a whole or at least for selected people or groups of people.

Items [30] and [33] suggest that the difference between the two parties is a set of nuances, and both seem to encourage the concept of the “big tent” – “a group or organization which claims to have members who reflect a range of diverse social and political opinions or viewpoints” in the same dictionary – and thereby comprise individuals who can be internally described as conservative, liberal, or mixed when a packet of political issues is put together. Effective politics in the United States, then, takes place along a spectrum created from two colors: at the far “right” are the ultraconservatives, the reddish of the “red”; at the far “left” are the ultraliberals, the bluest of the “blue”; and in between are the darker, and thus more complicated but less easy to understand, hues which could be imagined as variants of purple, a color which seems not to get used in political discourse. Whatever mixing does take place reflects the complexities of life within a democratic republic of Jewish-Christian

cultural heritage that emphasizes capitalism and patriotism, yet in the 1990s the word “triangulation” was given a new meaning to suggest that there was a way to rise above the “bipartisan” – two-party – quarrels and achieve workable solutions to problems, as the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* indicates:

[35] a declared ideology or collection of views and opinions and ideas and such like which cannot be classified as either left or right of whatever is determined to be in the center of a line representing political ideas and such like and which is somehow considered as a sum to be superior to anything along the range from extreme left to extreme right and which can be diagrammatically depicted as being somewhere above the center of the left-to-right line and therefore drawn with lines from the left and right ends extending upward to a point so that a three-sided two-dimensional geometrical shape is created.

The word “superior,” of course, puts a political spin on the matter, as some might consider the result to be a compromise which yields a downward-pointing triangle.

There are many issues which politicians, interested citizens who are neither in nor seeking office, and even other people in or somehow connected to the United States discuss in varying degrees of passion, and their time frames for attracting attention range from the perpetual to the ephemeral, while some lead a cyclical existence. Examples include abortion, the death penalty, rights to possess and use weapons, terrorism, racial and ethnic relations, immigration, the role of government in economic affairs, same-sex marriage, and engaging in war, and socialization seems to play a greater role in forming and maintaining individual convictions than does independent, personal reflection. It is intriguing to find that issues often get simplified so that they can be integrated into packages which get accepted through personal associations and that peer pressure might cause insufficient reasoning or candidates for office to support causes superficially or – especially in the case of a “flip flop,” or change in position – according to prevailing or developing public opinion for electoral benefit. An example, given recent hot topics, would be when an ordinarily “liberal” person gets branded a “conservative” – and thereby identified with the “right,” the Republican Party, and even Christian fundamentalists – for taking a stance which questions “same-sex marriage”; to be a “liberal” somehow seems to imply that “same-sex marriage” must be accepted (at the risk of being accused of wanting to deny rights to homosexuals), although a reasonable person would understand that such an issue is not only complex (e.g. what does marriage entail?, what are the purposes of marriage?, how did marriage become a social institution?, is it not financial benefits that spouses enjoy which are at the core of the issue?) but also a Pandora’s Box (e.g. if a male can marry a male and not procreate,

why then should marriage be limited to a construct involving only people?,⁸ are not potential polygamists being denied their rights by laws restricting a person to only one spouse at a time?, has not the institution of marriage been a surrogate for prostitution or sexual slavery, and in which case, should it not be abolished?). Once a person starts to look at such a divisive issue deeply, critically, or in a challenging way, that person risks slights suggesting a treacherous shift to the opposite side or – a bother for many thinking people who covet inclusion – earning a reputation as a “radical,” which the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* explains to be

[36] a person whose political views and/or activities are not considered to be “conservative” or “liberal” or ... a hybrid of such; somebody who wants major changes in society; an annoying person.

Evidently, being any one of those is a foil for American democracy, at least until a future generation cultivates a radical perspective as something mainstream.

It is not the objective of this article to delve into American political issues, of which there are many, so the example above suffices. However, it is important to note that understanding the meanings and contexts of salient American vocabulary in regard to government and politics raises cultural awareness because some items are rather specific or unique (e.g. Senate, Republican) while others might trigger different interpretations by people who are not American (e.g. democracy, federal). Working backwards through the article, then, such items of vocabulary as conservative, liberal, Republican, Democrat, democracy, federal, bureaucrat, Supreme Court, Congress, senator, congress(wo)man, and president have contextual meanings which require learning at two levels to understand what Americans are thinking in terms of government and politics. One level – the more formal – is that which is revealed in serious textbooks for studying American government and other learned materials which delve into political Americana, and these can lead to a good understanding of the theory and institutions of American governance and the constraints within which the politicians and other personnel in government must operate. The other level is less formal and is tainted with shades of ignorance and simplification, but that too is very important for democracy, especially when it allows for regular members of the citizenry to air their complaints about “the government” or any of its personnel or institutions without getting too detailed or sophisticated. What has been presented in this article, then, is a combination from both levels so that students and/or observers of American society can get insights into what Americans associate with government and politics.

Notes

1. The first four, all with the same title as this article, are in *Gengo Bunka Ronshû / Studies in Language and Culture* 31, 1 (2009): 173-191; 31, 2 (2010): 3-19; 32, 2 (2011): 33-50; and 35, 1 (2013): 135-153.

2. George Jappe's *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary: A Means to Study a Dynamic Language and to Gain Insights into a Complex Culture* (2012), which incorporates most of the entries from the four previously published Ameriglish dictionaries and has some changes and a good number of additional entries (altogether there are 2892 entries); the earlier dictionaries are George Jap's *Ameriglish Dictionary* (2007), *Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* (2008), *Second Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* (2008), and *Third Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* (2009). All five dictionaries were printed at Nagoya University.

3. There are of course other reasons, but delving into them, providing details, and commenting on or analyzing them is not the purpose here.

4. The "Gestapo," a word formed from "Geheime Staatspolizei," was the Secret State Police of Germany under the National Socialist regime from 1933 to 1945. Although it is not the purpose of this article to insinuate that the United States has been becoming increasingly totalitarian, there are many Americans of various political persuasions who do feel that "the government" has become too intrusive and threatening. An example which has recently come into effect is the requirement that Americans with at least \$10,000 in bank and other financial accounts outside the United States claim the interest(s) earned from them on their annual I.R.S. forms as well as provide details about each foreign account on another form to be submitted annually to an office of the Department of the Treasury in Detroit; this, as well as the requirement to file income-tax forms and (if above a modest threshold) to pay income taxes despite not being a resident of the United States, has become such an onerous responsibility for Americans who are living in another country that it was a major factor behind 1534 and 1781 Americans relinquishing their citizenship in 2010 and 2011. For readers who might like to pursue theses that the American government has been becoming "fascist" or such like, here are two books from different sides of the American political spectrum to start with: Jim Marrs, *The Rise of the Fourth Reich: The Secret Societies That Threaten to Take Over America* (New York: Harper, 2009); and Jonah Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the Left from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* (London etc.: Penguin Books, 2009).

5. Being a "republic," of course, does not mean that a country or a part of a country has to be a democracy, rather than a dictatorship of sorts. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,

for example, was a federation (union) of fifteen republics (e.g. Russia, Lithuania, Armenia, Uzbekistan) which as a unified polity was a republic itself (e.g. its last president was Mikhail Gorbachov), although one run by a political group (the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) which ideologically supported the concept of a “dictatorship of the proletariat.” Another intriguing example is the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, which has a president who has been dead since 1994 and whose two successors to date have been bloodline descendants of the president (hence, in essence, a hereditary monarchy), and which is run by a national-socialist political party that might make such a dictator of the ages as Adolf Hitler feel proud. Conversely, of course, nowadays a “monarchy” is not necessarily equated with repression, and such contemporary monarchies as those in the United Kingdom (and some Commonwealth countries such as Canada and Australia) and Sweden have a very good reputation when it comes to honoring the spirit of democracy.

6. This expression and its abbreviation, created to capture key ideas that come through American political discourse and propaganda, probably do not exist anywhere but here. Please note that the abbreviation begins with “PC,” implying that a person who is “patriotic” and supports “capitalism” is “politically correct” (again, the author having a bit of fun).

7. Alas, there are no “mesoconservatives.” That might be too complicated in a binary political world.

8. This requires introducing the expression “trans-species marriage,” a formal social arrangement in which a person weds and somehow intends to make a meaningful life with an animal (e.g. a dog or a cat) or a plant (e.g. a tree). Although seemingly far-fetched, it ought to be noted that there are people in the United States (and elsewhere) who have very strong attachments to “different-species” creatures and who might like to enjoy the social status and dignity, as well as the spousal benefits, which marriage has typically imparted. What is not meant by the question in the text are marriages that do not involve a human partner; animals, plants, and other living things do not seem to have reached the educational levels required for understanding such concepts as marriage, rights, law, and benefits, hence the social institution of marriage is most likely of no interest to them.