

IS THERE A STRAUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY?

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As an academic generally considered to be a Straussian, I've recently been bemused to be grouped with a movement that allegedly controls the world. A whole slew of articles in the U.S. and Britain claim that the Bush Administration's military interventionism stems from the hidden influence of Leo Strauss through his highly placed acolytes in the White House.

Strauss has been dead for thirty years. He was the author of a large number of brilliant but recondite books on philosophers such as Plato and Spinoza, with little about practical politics and almost nothing about the United States. It's more than a little odd that he should be considered the mastermind of a Republican blueprint for global hegemony.

What is the factual basis for this allegation? I have some personal experience that is relevant to the connection between Straussians and neo-conservative foreign policy. As a graduate student at Yale, I worked as a research assistant for the first Reagan Administration's transition team. This brought me into contact with a number of people who are senior officials in the Bush administration today or close to its thinking, including Paul Wolfowitz, Abram Shulsky and Charles Fairbanks.

My own observation is that, while their exposure to Strauss' teachings is not irrelevant to their policy positions, it is the least relevant influence. Take the case of Wolfowitz, most often cited as evidence of Straussian influence in the inner circles of power. Contrary to the portrayal of him by those enamored of conspiracy theories, he is not some Svengali who was parachuted into the Oval Office because of his ideological agenda. He is a career civil servant who has served both Republican and Democratic presidents. He is known inside the Beltway for his discretion and calm. His influence today is the result of thirty years of professional experience as he climbed higher in the ranks of government. Although he was influenced as a student by Straussians, the University of Chicago international affairs professor Albert Wohlstetter was far more relevant to shaping his view of world events.

Others closely associated with the Bush Administration including Shulsky and Fairbanks also studied with students of Strauss such as Allan Bloom and Harvey Mansfield. But their policy preferences are far more easily explained than by searching through the writings of Strauss. They reflect the evolution of neo-conservatism in general, going back to its origins with Democrats such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Scoop Jackson. That's how many of the people now associated with the Bush administration and its thinking got their start. There's no need to allege a secret Straussian agenda when everything the neo-conservatives stand for has been a matter of record for years, easily accessible through their publications and records of service.

Neo-conservatism began with disaffected Democrats who believed that their party, shattered by Lyndon Johnson's abysmal handling of the Vietnam conflict, had been taken over by pacifism, isolationism and one-worldism, epitomized by George McGovern. For better or worse, the tough-minded liberal internationalist interventionism of FDR, Truman, Acheson and JFK had migrated to the Nixon administration. The Democrats' retreat from the foreign policy center increased under Jimmy Carter, famous for decrying America's "inordinate fear of Communism." As left-leaning opinion elites grew increasingly infatuated with third world socialism and the corrosive belief that America was responsible for all the world's ills, Moynihan posed his famous question as U.N. Ambassador: Who better? America was not perfect, but was there a better alternative to constitutional democracy, pluralism, individual liberties and free markets?

This was the birth of neo-conservatism in full. People influenced by Moynihan including Elliott Abrams and Charles Fairbanks took Carter's emphasis on human rights and, rather than concede the moral high ground to the left, argued that liberal democracy, most successfully exemplified by the United States, could in fact best claim among all competing political systems to advance human rights around the world. American military intervention should not only serve American interests (the Nixon-Kissinger approach), but American ideals. In fact, America's self-interest was inseparable from its efforts to spread the blessings of

democracy to other peoples. That is exactly the reasoning behind the Bush administration's current military action in Afghanistan and Iraq, and, not surprisingly, many of its main players including Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and Wolfowitz emerged from that evolution of neo-conservative thinking seasoned throughout five Republican presidencies.

It's like killing a flea with a howitzer to invoke a philosophical heavy hitter like Strauss to explain what are longstanding and completely accessible policy debates stretching back to the 1970's. As for Strauss' other alleged ties to conservatism, most of them evaporate upon even a cursory familiarity with his writings. You will search in vain for an endorsement of capitalism or libertarianism, hardly surprising given Strauss' life-long endorsement of Plato's and Aristotle's elevation of duty to the common good over private self-interest. As for Strauss somehow supporting the Christian Right, one would have thought this too silly to rebut. Evangelical Christian conservatives in the U.S. are often distrustful of Straussians, and for good reason – most believe in secular liberal democracy. Strauss spent his whole life wrestling with the tension between reason and revelation, but most would say he came down on the side of reason. (In my view, it's not as simple as that, but that is another and much longer story). In any event, as a Jewish philosopher, had he opted for revelation, it most assuredly would not have been the Christian God, let alone the God of Jerry Falwell.

II

I have the impression that many of the pundits who are painting Strauss as the hidden mastermind of Republican policies in the present are not objecting so much to Strauss' thought as to conservatism itself. Perhaps it's easier to weave a conspiracy theory of hidden influence than face the unpleasant fact that many of the views attributed to Strauss are in reality the views of mainstream America, held by a majority of both sexes, all ethnic groups, and both political parties. In order to see this, let's consider some of the allegations about Strauss' malign influence.

Strauss is said to believe that an elite of the superior should rule in a democracy, a view that can supposedly be traced back to the

Philosopher King in Plato's Republic. What Strauss actually conveys about the Platonic teaching is that, as a practical political agenda, nothing could be more dangerous than to imagine that wisdom could rule. It's precisely the delusion that any ruling group could be in possession of the final truth that led to the disastrous politics of 20th century totalitarianism. In Strauss' view, Plato clearly identifies the Republic as a utopia, not a blueprint for reform. There is no way that the rule of wisdom can be brought about by conscious human action. The obstacles Plato's philosophy places in the way of wisdom actually coming to power are a salutary reminder that it's better to accept imperfection than give total power to a self-professed wise man who turns out to be a Stalin.

When the *New York Times* and others huff and puff about Straussian elitism, all they really mean is that conservatives – like Americans in general – believe that, while all of us have equal rights, some people demonstrate their superior merit through brains and hard work and that, other things being equal, it's only right that their achievements should be recognized and their opinion given more weight. Strauss probably thought that, too, but it's got nothing to do as such with philosopher kings or Plato. Meritocracy is generic to liberalism, which promotes the equality of opportunity for the earned inequality of result.

Much the same is true of the allegation that Strauss believed government in a democracy must keep its true policies a secret from the ignorant many. The pundits usually point to Strauss' books about "esoteric" communication and the idea that philosophers may hide their views from the public. This latter point surely excludes no whiff of brimstone. It was the common assumption beginning with the ancient philosophers, echoed by St. Augustine, and repeated down to Hegel that it might not be possible to state the full truth in public. Gibbon, in his Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, says this view was held by all philosophical schools during classical antiquity.

Why? Because, for most of human history, and in much of the world today, it's dangerous to tell the truth out loud. It can lead to suppression and death. What the pundits try to characterize as a view unique to Strauss, and somehow shocking or creepy, is in truth a wide-

spread and ordinary assumption in the history of ideas. Scholars who specialized in the Soviet Union called it “Aesopian communication” – the use of myth or allegory to communicate views too dangerous for open discussion under a tyranny.

As for the charge that Strauss’ followers in the White House practice esoteric communication, that seems pretty silly, given the mountain of verbal and written evidence provided by Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and the other main players for what they are doing. Is anyone in any serious doubt what they really think about Saddam Hussein, Yasser Arafat, the Iranian ayatollahs or al Qaeda? All this charge amounts to is saying that the Bush administration searches for the rhetorically most effective way of making its case to the public – something that every administration does.

What it all comes down to is that the conspiracy theorists are tracing to Strauss views that most Americans would agree with, and affecting to find them bizarre and frightening. Meritocracy, the equality of opportunity for the earned inequality of result, the notion that, all in all, the well-educated have more of value to say about public policy than the poorly educated – while the *New York Times* is apparently absolutely shocked that anyone could hold these views, they are in fact held by most people as the core values of American democracy.

They were probably held by Strauss as well, not on any complicated philosophical grounds, but simply because they are common sense – and Strauss always argued that philosophy must begin with common sense. It might go beyond it, but it can’t ignore it without sacrificing the moderation and prudence that are inseparable from sound theoretical speculation. It isn’t that the Bush Administration has, through its thrall to Strauss, introduced a frightening new departure. It’s that, in the decades since Strauss wrote and taught, academic and media opinion elites have moved considerably further to the left. Strauss’ views, set in print years ago, haven’t changed and have been there for all to see. They were closer to the center of elite opinion at that time than they are now. It’s the opinion elites that have changed by moving away from the center.

III

Before we can intelligently assess whatever connection there may be between Strauss’ philosophy and American conservatism, we have to be clear what we mean by conservatism. There is a tendency in the media of other countries to use the blanket term “neo-conservatism” to describe American conservatism in general, the coalition that brought George W. Bush to the presidency. But there are several major strands in contemporary American conservatism. Neo-conservatism is only one of them, and it refers specifically to the kind of interventionism (military and otherwise) on behalf of liberal democracy against terrorism and tyranny typified by Wolfowitz, Cheney and Rumsfeld.

Neo-conservatism is probably a minority view in the White House. Of more influence is what is often termed “movement” conservatism, a strictly domestic emphasis on free markets, personal liberty and curtailing government growth. Often traced back to Barry Goldwater, it frequently overlaps with an isolationist strain in the Republican Party memorably summed up by then Vice Presidential candidate Bob Dole’s remark in 1976 that all the wars of the 20th century had been “Democrat wars” – with the implication that all had been mistakes, including World War II. Finally, these two strains often overlap with the “Christian Right” (who may or may not have leanings toward neo-conservatism).

Failure to understand these different strains has been particularly grotesque in the British and European press, where ignorance combined with snobbery toward the U.S. and antipathy toward all forms of conservatism in general have produced some ludicrous howlers – to wit, that Bush’s supporters represent an alliance of Straussians from the Bible Belt, Christian fundamentalists and Big Oil, all combining to invade Iraq on behalf of Jesus, out of hatred for the heathen Muslims, and to get their hands on all that oil, led by the “cowboy” from Texas (a cowboy with degrees from Yale and Harvard, and descended from the Yankee patrician class of New England, but never mind that). Or (my personal favorite) that John Ashcroft is a Straussian. Anyone familiar with Strauss’ writings will immediately recognize that there is little in them that would provide a robust philosophical justification for any of these strains of con-

servatism except (for reasons I will get to in the next section) one aspect of the neo-conservative strain.

The policies spearheaded in the Bush Administration by Rumsfeld, Cheney and Wolfowitz are a direct evolution of an inner debate that has gone on among these different strains of the conservative coalition that has won the White House for Republicans for 22 of the last 34 years. The Bush doctrine does not stem from the books of Leo Strauss, but from a dialectic of foreign policy thinking developed over five Republican presidencies. Many of the main players today including Cheney and Rumsfeld got their start with Nixon and Kissinger, and their successes so far in Iraq and Afghanistan represent a successful combination of Reagan's idealism about America as the "shining city on the hill" with Nixonian-Kissingerian Realpolitik.

Republicans are sometimes reluctant to concede this today because of their belief that Nixon's arms control negotiations with the Soviets were not tough enough and that he lacked the idealism necessary to wage the battle of ideas on behalf of democracy (to say nothing of Watergate). But Reagan's success in prodding the Soviet Union to implode could not have happened without the solid Realpolitik basis laid by Nixon. America's prestige would have suffered a calamitous decline if Nixon had not ended the Vietnam conflict in the measured way that he did. Detente had many problems, but it did open the Soviets up to western influence, and coaxed them to stand aside from North Vietnam so that America could make an orderly withdrawal. The same goes for the opening to China, a classic chess move that threw the communist world off balance. It's true that the Nixon-Kissinger policy was often too cynical and had no relish for selling the ideal of democracy. But let's not forget that, although Reagan's foreign policy was high on idealism, it only stabilized and became effective when George Shultz, an old Kissinger associate, took over the State Department. In his origins, Reagan represented a strain in the Republican party that had always been emphatically anti-communist, but in practice also hated "foreign entanglements" and often inclined toward isolationism. Republican anti-communists including Joe McCarthy simultaneously blasted the

Democrats under Truman and Acheson for being weak on communism in the moral sense, and especially insofar as it corrupted American society at home, while at the same time opposing most of the practical measures they took to combat it abroad. Not coincidentally, Pat Buchanan, the most vocal of isolationists in Republican circles today, invokes McCarthy as his model.

They called for the "rollback" of communism, its complete eradication and expulsion from the territories it had occupied by invasion or coup d'état. But, by opposing or being luke-warm about real-world efforts short of "rollback" to curb Soviet and Chinese communist power, their anti-communism sometimes became a kind of metaphysical project. It stirred moral fervor, but, because anything less than perfection was deemed a cowardly compromise, it retarded actual interventionism abroad and thereby provided an anti-Communist fig leaf for the older strain of isolationism and opposition to the "taint" of "foreign wars." The same kind of reasoning re-surfaced when congressional Republican leaders like Don Nickles opposed the Clinton administration's intervention in Kosovo. Because Clinton's plan wasn't perfect or forceful enough, better to do nothing at all.

The genius of Reagan was that he united the Goldwaterite moral condemnation of communism with the sense of pragmatism and Realpolitik inherited from Nixon and Kissinger. President Reagan provided the inspiration and the grand strategy; Secretary Shultz worked the levers of power. It took a while to work out the synthesis. We often forget now that in the opening months of the Reagan presidency, opposition to his appointment of neo-conservatives to foreign policy posts often came from Republican Jesse Helms. Although he claimed it was because they bore the taint of Kissingerian detente, and could therefore not be trusted to deal toughly with the Soviets over arms control, at bottom Helms represented the resurgence of Republican heartland isolationism and its unease over their hero Reagan's reaching out to men from "the East" or "the Ivy League" (sometimes former Democrats) who would embroil America in foreign wars. Helms combined the desire for a moral Armageddon over godless communism with a distaste for real action.

The neo-conservatives could hardly be ac-

cused of being soft on Communist ideology. They themselves rejected the Nixon-Kissinger approach to the extent that it was too cynical, too focused on deal-making with foreign powers regardless of morality, and therefore incapable of appealing to Americans' own convictions about their role in the world. Elliott Abrams, Jean Kirkpatrick and others of like mind were willing to be warriors of ideas, to use American might to help goodness triumph over evil. They agreed with Helms and other movement conservatives that the SALT process had often been bad for the U.S. But by the same token, they were liberal internationalists of the Truman/Acheson/Wilsonian stripe. They could forgo the spiritual purity of the moral Armageddon in exchange for partial but real victories over the Sandinistas and Castro, and by aiding dissident movements like Solidarity, chipping away at Soviet power through its proxies.

At bottom, Helms did not want American power used abroad – he reflected that old and deep distrust of foreign entanglements. He preferred America to concentrate on self-defense so that it could shut out the world, and therefore supported Reagan's "star wars" system. He opposed arms control treaties, including Reagan's INF and START accords, because he didn't want America forever entangled with the Soviets – verifying and monitoring such treaties would mean constant American-Soviet interaction. Helms wanted America to reject SALT not so much because he wanted a better treaty, but because he wanted nothing to do with evil communism as a partner. The neo-conservatives, by contrast, wanted to reform SALT so that American power could be projected more effectively around the world. The same mentality informing Helms' view was behind Bob Dole's faux pas about "Democrat wars." Even when the foe was as evil as Hitler, it's better for America to stay at home and preserve its freedoms from foreign corruption. The isolationist strain was one dimension of Reagan's complicated political persona as it evolved over many years on his rise to the presidency. But the 200 ship navy was another. The Reagan administration took the lesson taught by Nixon and Kissinger that military power alters the substance of foreign policy and hitched it to the moral rectitude of the Goldwaterite, movement conservatives' abhorrence of godless commu-

nism. It was a moral absolute calibrated to succeed in practice, and we are watching its veterans do it again today against Islamic terrorism, aptly compared by Wolfowitz to totalitarianism. These lessons were not learned from Leo Strauss, but from thirty years of trial and error, success and failure, and an evolving Republican moral stance toward world affairs.

IV

Is there no connection at all, then, between Strauss's teachings and the Bush administration's foreign policy? Actually, there is one very important connection. It's the concept of the "regime" as the basis for understanding political reality. In mounting his defense of the United States as flawed but better than the alternatives, Daniel Patrick Moynihan employed this concept and explicitly cited Strauss's influence.

Writing in *A Dangerous Place*, Moynihan credits Strauss with emphasizing that, given the failure of the various versions of internationalism during the 20th century – whether it be the United Nations version, or the more lethal versions of Communism and Fascism – liberal democracies today must return to the more traditional concept of the regime or the "particular society," and defend the distinct legitimacy of liberal democracy as embodied in the nation state as against various forms of tyranny masquerading under allegedly progressive ideology. On this basis, Moynihan called for the United States and other liberal democracies to form a "party of liberty" in the U.N. to oppose such obnoxious measures as the equating of Zionism with racism. Today, Strauss' emphasis on the regime is familiar to us as the term "regime change," associated with the Bush administration as the core of its moral justification for prosecuting the war on terrorism and its state sponsors through military action abroad.

Like any sober observer, Strauss believed (as Winston Churchill had put it) that democracy was the worst form of government, except for all the others. If there is a solid link between Strauss's thought and the Bush Administration's view of the world, it comes down to this. Strauss believed that you can distinguish better and worse regimes from one another – that there is such a thing as legitimate government, in contrast with illegitimate tyrannies. This distinction is not just a cultural prejudice, and

it's not just a particular historical belief that might change with the times. The distinction between legitimate and illegitimate government, like the distinction between virtue and vice, is grounded in human nature and is eternally accessible to the human mind. You don't have to be a Straussian, or influenced by Strauss, to hold these views. But Strauss argued powerfully and eloquently for them. When one defends liberal democracy, it isn't that one believes it to be perfect or free of failings – far from it. But no balanced observer can believe that liberal democracy, with its flaws and all too frequent lapses from its own ideals, is no better than a vicious tyranny that does evil things not as lapses, but systematically. When liberal democracies like the United States or Israel commit injustices or human rights abuses, they are falling beneath their own standards. When tyrants like Saddam Hussein perform such deeds, they are acting in complete conformity to their standards. The injustice of liberal democracy is an exception (all too frequently occurring) to the rule. The injustice of tyranny is its rule, its only rule.

Strauss' arguments for the primacy of the regime and the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate government emerged against the backdrop of his long-standing debate with the Marxist theorist Alexandre Kojève and his strictures against the German existentialist-philosopher and Nazi partisan Martin Heidegger. Kojève was fond of quoting Heidegger's remark made in 1935 that America and Russia were "metaphysically the same" – that it made no difference whether one lived under Roosevelt or Stalin, because all alleged differences between tyranny and democracy were swallowed up and rendered irrelevant by the juggernaut of "global technology" or, to take Kojève's equivalent, the "universal homogeneous state." Strauss repudiated this spurious internationalism in both its communist and fascist variants, because its coruscating relativism undermined civic decency and liberal democracy's capacity to defend itself against worse forms of government while remaining aware of its own shortcomings.

It's hard to imagine a more fundamental lack of moderation, a more fundamental immaturity and lack of responsibility, than Heidegger's equation of liberal democracy and totalitarianism on the grounds that "global technology," the

dynamo of modernization, swallowed up all distinctions between better and worse regimes and rendered such distinctions naive. In the years since Strauss wrote, however, the attempt to do an end run around the regime in favor of allegedly "global" trends (whether economic or social) has become ever more entrenched in our opinion elites. The left's preoccupation with both the dangers of economic globalization and the salvation allegedly promised by an emerging "global civil society" of activist movements is often little more than a sophistry that serves one aim: At all costs, the discussion must never be allowed to turn to defending liberal democracy as preferable (despite all its failings) to other principles of political authority at work in the world today. For after all, at bottom, we all know that there is no such thing as American liberal democracy – it's merely the spearhead for "Empire," the global reign of technology, economic exploitation and militarism, hence the cause of all injustice, misery and unhappiness on the planet.

If Strauss has any value for current thinking about foreign policy, it is to remind us that freedom and progress can only take place within the modern nation-state with its individual liberties and representative political institutions, and that all political movements claiming to be able to create "global" peace and justice are at best naive and at worst lead to aspiring universal tyrants like Stalin. Strauss was right about all of this thirty or more years ago, and, in the meantime, the trends he deplored have become much stronger, which makes his thinking on this issue more timely and needful than ever.

All in all, then, the link between Strauss' teachings and Bush's foreign policy is a narrow one, but at the same time a strong one. With his emphasis on the comparative superiority of liberal democracy to tyranny, Strauss (along with other thinkers and statesmen) did contribute to the evolving climate of opinion that enabled the U.S. and its allies to overthrow the Taliban and Saddam Hussein. And I, for one, am proud to be called a Straussian if that is taken to mean I support the spread of democracy and its victory over tyrants.

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