

What Hath Strauss Wrought?

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THE NEW YORK TIMES, the New Yorker, and the Boston Globe, among others, have sounded the alarm: The Bush administration, particularly its foreign policy team, is in the grip of a coterie of neoconservative intellectuals who are themselves in the grip of the antidemocratic and illiberal teachings of Leo Strauss, a political philosopher who taught at the University of Chicago in the '50s and '60s and who died in 1973. On its face, this scenario is wildly implausible. It supposes that President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretary of State Powell, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, and National Security Adviser Rice, non-Straussians by all accounts, are stooges and dupes. It insinuates that neoconservative intellectuals--Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz is at the top of everybody's list--have craftily ascended to positions of power in the federal government from which they aim to implement Strauss's teachings. And it invests Strauss, a student of political philosophy whose life's work consisted in writing learnedly about thinkers from Plato to Heidegger, and sharing his discoveries with students, with almost superhuman powers: Through the force of his ideas, we are told, this scholar and teacher is able, a generation and a half after his death, to command the respect and loyalty--and indeed, to compel the actions--of highly successful and well-placed individuals not only in politics but in the media and the academy.

Despite its wild implausibility, the scenario is in one important respect true. And that has to do with the influence of Leo Strauss on a generation of neoconservative thinkers, some of whom are active in our politics (and some of whom can even be found writing in these pages).

Judging from the recent hubbub, which restates an accusation that has gained much currency in the academy, that influence is nefarious. Strauss is said to be an elitist who scorned democracy. He is attacked as an atheist who encouraged his students to see through

the falseness of religion, while manipulating it to discipline and mollify the masses. And the realization of his ideas, we are warned, requires his followers to establish by force of arms a foreign empire for America.

These accusations, similar versions of which are often leveled at neoconservatives, are nonsense, and in parts vicious nonsense. Yet the ideas that the accusations pervert are those of Strauss, and when those ideas are restored to their true shape they can be seen as articulating core neoconservative convictions.

Strauss was not an elitist--but he was a lover of excellence. He believed in the cultivation of the mind, and sought to restore respect for its manifestation in the ambition for honor and nobility in the soul, which he understood to be not only compatible with but essential to democracy. On the occasion of Winston Churchill's death, he told his class that "We have no higher duty, and no more pressing duty, than to remind ourselves and our students, of political greatness, human greatness, of the peaks of human excellence." Strauss also shared Churchill's famous praise of democracy as the worst regime except for all the others that have been tried from time to time. Although he regarded modern democracy as flawed, it is, Strauss suggested, the form of government best suited to the protection and enjoyment of human liberty, and therefore should be defended wholeheartedly.

Strauss may have been a religious doubter, but he showed time and again that the question of the truth of religion seemed to have been left unsettled by the greatest figures in the history of political philosophy, and that therefore religious teachings, which concern man's highest and deepest longings, must be studied with care and an open mind. He loved the Hebrew Bible and sought to show that it was rich in wisdom about the human condition. He saw that religion could be either salutary or destructive, depending on the circumstances and the religious teaching in question. And he certainly believed that in our day religion could play a positive role in counteracting the tendency of liberal democracy to indiscriminately break down custom and convention.

Finally, Strauss was not a proponent of American empire--but he did teach the importance of American strength in defense of liberty. Writing in the midst of the Cold War, as a refugee from Nazi Germany and as a student of tyranny, Strauss insisted that totalitarians of the left and the right posed a profound threat to liberal democracy--a threat that liberal democrats tended to underestimate because of their habit of supposing that all individuals and nations are as open to reason and persuasion as liberal democrats consider themselves to be. Strauss encouraged liberal democracies to be strong in defending themselves and forceful in conducting a foreign policy in accord with their principles.

Strauss was no ordinary liberal democrat, but he was a staunch friend of liberal democracy. The urgency of defending liberal democracy by encouraging its virtues, combating its vices, and never losing sight of its enemies is the great political lesson that those of his students who became neoconservatives embraced. To be sure, Strauss seemed to prefer the classical

Greek philosophy of Plato and Aristotle to modern political philosophy. He was a proud Jew and took the claims of religion with utmost seriousness while keeping his distance from organized religion. He dwelled at length on liberal democracy's undemocratic and illiberal tendencies, in part because he loved the truth and in part because he was devoted to America's well-being. He was the kind of friend who makes one better by constantly exhibiting, through example and argument, the look of excellence. Not always an easy sort of friend, but the sort of friend, you would think, whom true liberals in every time and place would appreciate.

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