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The Shadow of Fascist Philosophy on Today's Conservative Politics Letter to the Editor by Peter Berkowitz

To the Editor:

This is a mean season in American politics. It is a disquieting sign of just how polarized public debate has become that Alan Wolfe, one of our most balanced, informed, and illuminating public intellectuals, has lost his cool and has taken to vulgarizing ideas and to demonizing one set of partisans and sanctifying another.

In "A Fascist Philosopher Helps Us Understand Contemporary Politics" (The Chronicle Review, April 2), Wolfe argues that Bush-administration critics have been barking up the wrong tree in identifying Leo Strauss as "the intellectual guru of the Bush administration." The real culprit is Carl Schmitt, a prominent German political theorist who joined the Nazi Party in 1933 and to whom, Wolfe is at pains to point out, Strauss was "once close professionally."

According to Wolfe, even if conservatives have never heard of Schmitt, they have embraced his concept that politics is based on the distinction between friend and enemy, which means that "you treat your opposition as antagonistic to everything in which you believe." Wolfe finds his proof that conservatives view politics as war in the polemics of Ann H. Coulter, in the aggressive style of talk-show host Bill O'Reilly, and in the hardball politics of Tom DeLay and Karl Rove.

In contrast, Wolfe contends, liberals such as himself are self-critical and conciliatory, are devoted to "human welfare or the greatest good for the greatest number," and believe in human rights.

In standing against contemporary liberals, concludes Wolfe, conservatives in America stand against "America's historic liberal heritage."

Where to begin? First, there is Wolfe's gratuitous insinuation that Strauss somehow shared Schmitt's fascist politics. In fact, in 1932 Strauss wrote a still unsurpassed critique of Schmitt's (The Concept of the Political, and Strauss devoted much of his career to fortifying the foundations of liberal democracy.

Second, Wolfe promulgates a basic misunderstanding of Schmitt. The distinction between friend and enemy does not apply to individuals, party politics, or domestic affairs. It pertains to peoples, or nations in relation to other nations, and it revolves around a threat to one's way of life. From Schmitt's point of view, Rush Limbaugh is as much a liberal individualist as Al Franken.

Third, Wolfe's choice of conservative standard-bearers is, to say the least, tendentious. What of public intellectuals such as Charles Krauthammer, George Will, and William Kristol, and of office holders such as Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice?

Fourth, Wolfe's contention that American liberals are characterized by moderation, compromise, and reason betrays an odd inattention to today's left, which prominently features Michael Moore, Howard Dean, and the embrace of Bush hatred. ...

Fifth, by suggesting that one party in America is in its essence un-American while the other embodies the true spirit of the nation, Wolfe encourages the deplorable tendency, of which he claims himself incapable and that he purports to oppose, to view tens of millions of his fellow citizens as the enemy.

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