

# Tabloid Scholarship

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## Tabloid Scholarship

By Peter Berkowitz

## *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire*

By Anne Norton

Yale University Press. Pp. 256. \$25.00.

This is not the book to read if you wish to learn about Leo Strauss, one of the twentieth centuries great students of the history of political philosophy, or about his influence on the shape of neoconservatism and thereby on the Bush administration's transformation of American foreign policy in response to the 9/11 attacks. Yet Norton's book, chock full of factual errors, personal smears, and fatuous assertions is valuable for what it tells you about the debasement of intellectual standards at our leading universities.

Before p. 20 in this peer-reviewed and Yale Editorial Board approved book, one encounters numerous mistakes. Some are small. Contrary to Norton, Strauss not only wrote about Spinoza, Maimonides, and Carl Schmitt before he came to America in 1938 at age 39, he also wrote a full length study of Thomas Hobbes. Some of the mistakes are vicious. Contrary to Norton, Harvard Professor of Government Harvey Mansfield (my colleague for 9 years) welcomes students on the left. Some of the mistakes are pure fantasy. Contrary to Norton, a predominance of the members of the President's Council on Bioethics (which I served for a short time as a Senior Consultant) are not Straussians.

The book breaks new ground in an increasingly popular genre that might be called tabloid scholarship. Norton, a professor of political science at the University of Pennsylvania, recycles stories she has been told, many by unnamed friends and colleagues, to paint a lurid picture of Strauss's students. Strauss she allows, though timid and arrogant, was a brilliant interpreter of texts, who came to understand the shortcomings of liberal democracy in light of the teachings of Plato and Aristotle. According to Norton, however, his students are a group of soft, weak, anxious, and, in many cases, dissolute men. Partly as a result of the illiberal cult Strauss encouraged, they have, contends Norton, deviously foisted upon President Bush a foreign policy that is fascistic in its disdain for individual rights, jihadist in its fanaticism, imperialist in its desire to conquer other peoples and bring them under American rule, and anti-Semitic in its contempt for Arabs and Muslims.

You would think that with accusations of such gravity, Professor Norton would be careful to provide, and Yale University Press would be assiduous in insisting upon, citations to relevant sources. Astonishingly, however, there is not a footnote to be found in Norton's book, not to the few and fragmentary quotations she adduces, not in support of her tendentious interpretations, and not to back up her venomous stories.

In fact, a number of individuals who have contributed to the public debate about Iraq and who crafted the policy informing the removal of Saddam have been influenced by the teachings of Leo Strauss and his students. They have been among the foremost defenders of the view that the liberation of 50 million Muslims in Afghanistan and Iraq from totalitarian rule has served American strategic interests both by eliminating regimes that were prepared to use weapons of mass destruction and by spreading liberty around the globe, which makes the liberty of everybody, Americans included, more secure.

Anne Norton betrays a casual disregard for the elementary standards of public argument that would make an editor of a Hollywood scandal sheet blush. The lesson from Yale University Press's decision to publish this book and hurry it to the market in time for the presidential election is that for leading elements and institutions in the American academy, to qualify as scholarship a book doesn't need facts; it may ground arguments in hearsay, impression and innuendo; and it will be permitted to traffic in gossip, rumor mongering and character assassination provided that the target of its attacks holds moral and political views with which a majority in the academy disagrees.

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