

Excommunication for Thee . . .

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Alan Wolfe is a distinguished public intellectual. He is professor of political science and director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College. He is a longtime contributing editor to the *New Republic*. He is a frequent contributor to the Sunday *New York Times Book Review*. And over the course of many years, he has earned a reputation for overcoming political cant and scholarly rigidities to write penetratingly for the public about American political ideas and institutions.

So when Wolfe, from the platform provided by the aforementioned *Times Book Review*, calls for the excommunication of a conservative public intellectual, as he did on January 21 in a scathing critique of Dinesh D'Souza's *The Enemy at Home*, the judgment resounds. The force of that judgment, however, would have been greatly diminished had *Times* readers been aware that, like D'Souza, Wolfe has engaged in an immoderate post-9/11 attempt to expose the *real* enemy at home. Wolfe, it would seem, believes that one set of standards applies to conservative intellectuals, and another to intellectuals, like himself, who are on the left.

D'Souza has written a book that slides all too easily from the provocative to the polemical to the incendiary. Wolfe finds nothing right with the book and everything wrong with it.

D'Souza's attempt to explain how Osama bin Laden is understood from the inside, by believing Muslims, is akin to "the Stalinist apologetics of the popular front period," and exhibits "a soft spot for radical evil." D'Souza's claim that conservative religious believers in America can find common ground with peaceful Muslim traditionalists, based on shared dismay over the decline of the family and the degradation of popular culture, warrants a scornful mention from Wolfe but not a refutation. Deriding D'Souza for the creation of a McCarthyite enemies list of leading leftists, Wolfe concludes by laying down criteria for the formation of a list of his own: "I look forward to the reaction from decent conservatives and Republicans who will, if they have any sense of honor, distance themselves, quickly and cleanly, from the Rishwain research scholar at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University."

There is ample reason to reject D'Souza's central theses. He contends that the "cultural left in this country is responsible for causing 9/11," but he provides no systematic inquiry and little evidence in support of so extreme an accusation. Moreover, his contention is undermined by his own discussion of Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian-born intellectual father of radical Islam. For Qutb famously was scandalized by the popular culture he encountered at a church social in America in the late 1940s, two decades, on D'Souza's own account, before the emergence in the 1960s of the contemporary cultural left. Contrary to D'Souza, the

jihadists hate America not in the first place because of feminism and egalitarianism, but because of our classical liberal beliefs in individual freedom and equality under the law, and their reverberations throughout all aspects of American society and culture.

Furthermore, D'Souza's assertion that left and right in America inhabit different moral universes distorts the situation. There is no doubt that tempers today are short and some policy differences do run deep. But generally, the disputes between right and left in America are not over rival conceptions of the political good but rather over competing ideas of what policies best serve individual freedom and equality under law.

As for D'Souza's charge that the cultural left represents a "domestic insurgency," it recklessly conflates disagreement, even vehement disagreement, which citizens are nonetheless inclined to settle through debate and elections, with war, which adversaries are disposed to resolve through death and destruction. Perhaps, as D'Souza asserts, some on the left, including some perched in and pontificating from high places, remain so convulsed with Bush hatred that in their hearts they would rather see America defeated in Iraq than the Bush administration vindicated. Yet it would still be wrong to confuse a fellow citizen's twisted passions with the murderous hatred of al Qaeda jihadists and Baathist insurgents.

To claim that by promoting, among other things, abortion, gay marriage, pornography, and atheism, the cultural left presents a threat to America as grave as that posed by radical Islam is seriously wrong and foolishly divisive. To make such an argument while America is at war with a fanatical adversary who regards all Americans as combatants and who seeks not concessions or reforms but America's annihilation is to blur critical issues when the rediscovery of our common ground is what is urgently called for.

So Wolfe is on solid ground with his hard-hitting criticism of *The Enemy at Home* and certainly has plenty of company on the right. Prominent and widely read conservative websites including *HughHewitt*, *Power Line*, *FrontPageMagazine*, and *National Review Online* have found severe flaws in the book, as has D'Souza's and my Hoover colleague, military historian Victor Davis Hanson, at *Townhall.com* and *Real Clear Politics*.

Wolfe's attack, though, is distinguished by his demand that decent and honorable conservatives "distance themselves, quickly and cleanly" from D'Souza. Apparently, conservatives who fail to promptly and unambiguously pronounce anathema are tainted by and complicit in D'Souza's errors and excesses. This is more than ironic coming from a writer who, like D'Souza, darkly proclaimed that America is menaced by an enemy at home. For Wolfe, as it happens, the enemy within does not arise from the cultural left but rather springs from Republicans and the right. His thesis no more withstands scrutiny than does D'Souza's, but by comparison has received very little.

Wolfe put forward his accusation in April 2004 in an essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled "A Fascist Philosopher Helps Us Understand Contemporary Politics." Likewise proceeding from the provocative to the polemical to the incendiary, Wolfe argued that "to understand what is distinctive about today's Republican Party," you have to understand the ideas of Nazi political theorist Carl Schmitt. Wolfe named names--heading the list are Ann Coulter and Bill O'Reilly--but his aim was to illuminate a widely shared sensibility. While conceding that Republicans and conservatives have probably not studied Schmitt, he nevertheless maintained that "Schmitt's way of thinking about politics pervades the contemporary zeitgeist in which Republican conservatism has flourished, often in ways so prescient as to be eerie."

Wolfe had in mind Schmitt's analysis in an essay from the early 1930s, *The Concept of the Political*. But to contrive the case for an affinity between Nazi political theory and contemporary American conservatism, Wolfe distorted the essence of Schmitt's doctrine.

Schmitt argued that "the political," which represents "the most intense and extreme antagonism," rests on the distinction between "friend and enemy." The distinction "denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or disassociation." Seeking an understanding of the distinction that was precise and pure, Schmitt asserted that "the friend and enemy concepts are to be understood in their concrete and existential sense, not as metaphors or symbols, not mixed and weakened by economic, moral, and other conceptions." So understood, the enemy involves "the real possibility of physical killing." In essence, the enemy is the people or state with whom another people or state goes to war:

The enemy is not merely any competitor or just any partner of a conflict in general. He is also not the private adversary whom one hates. An enemy exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity.

Notwithstanding Schmitt's argument that the political, properly understood, concerns a people's or a state's determination to resolve disputes by force of arms, Wolfe is determined to understand conservative party politics in America as Schmittian in character. It is true, as Wolfe subsequently argued in the *Chronicle* in an exchange of letters with critics (including me) in which he did not yield an inch, that for Schmitt, "an antithesis and antagonism remain . . . within the state's domain which have relevance for the concept of the political." It is also true, as Wolfe noted, that in extraordinary circumstances domestic politics deteriorates into civil war. But it is just as true that Schmitt was specifically concerned not with the residue, not, as he emphasized, with conceptions that are "mixed and weakened," but rather with "the nature of the political." And civil war is no longer party politics.

It is risible, therefore, for Wolfe to seek to assimilate Ann Coulter's vitriol and Bill O'Reilly's grandstanding to Schmitt's concept of the political. They are writers and talkers, often shouters, public performers, and certainly culture warriors. But they are no more disposed to

take up arms against the left than is the left disposed to take up arms against them. In their acceptance, for all practical purposes, of individual rights and the democratic process, they are, from a Schmittian point of view, liberals indistinguishable from Wolfe himself.

The supposed fascism of today's conservatives, argues Wolfe, helps us understand their electoral successes: "Conservatives win nearly all of their political battles with liberals because they are the only force in America that is truly political." For conservatives, he contends, "politics never stops" and is driven by rank partisanship indifferent to the public interest; liberals are "unworthy of recognition"; rights must be trampled upon and the power of the state to deal with emergencies must be relentlessly expanded because "conservatives always find cases of emergency." By contrast, claims Wolfe, liberals such as himself seek consensus, believe in pluralism, honor toleration, question their own convictions, and respect individual rights. Thus does their vastly superior morality doom liberals in their battle with today's ruthless neofascist conservatives. Except when it doesn't, for example a few months ago, in the 2006 midterm elections.

Wolfe's incendiary accusation, however, goes beyond this election or that, and is not affected by the existence of some on the left who may support Bush administration foreign policy and some on the right who may oppose it. What is critical, according to Wolfe, is to recognize that conservatives in America "stand against not only liberals but America's historic liberal heritage."

The threat posed by America's conservative enemy at home, in Wolfe's view, can hardly be exaggerated. By importing to America's shores a style of thought that is un-American, Wolfe explained in his response to his critics, conservatives have disfigured American politics:

Conservatives on the U.S. Supreme Court broke with principle to decide the 2000 election on naked partisan grounds; the president so chosen has pursued the most partisan course of any president since Reconstruction; and he has used an attack on all Americans to pursue an agenda that benefits only some of them. Our politics are ugly because conservatives have disproportionately contributed to making them ugly.

Wolfe seems incapable of entertaining the possibility that *Bush v. Gore* was a hard case, one of whose reasonable resolutions was the path chosen by the Supreme Court; that in domestic politics Bush has rather consistently pursued the policies he has publicly defended, has done little to stir the pot on abortion and affirmative action, has formally but not aggressively opposed same-sex marriage (as did Senator John Kerry in the 2004 campaign), and has made his peace with the welfare state; and that driven by partisan rage, Bush's opponents have often shamelessly misrepresented the administration's arguments and actions on national security. Yet given the available evidence in support of these propositions, shouldn't entertaining them, in our angry times, be one distinguishing mark of a liberal mind?

Wolfe's contention that conservatives are animated by the spirit of a Nazi political theorist is scarcely less incendiary or more defensible than D'Souza's claim that the cultural left forms a de facto alliance with al Qaeda. Yet whereas numerous prominent conservatives have been quick to publish their disagreements with D'Souza, who on the left rose to challenge Wolfe's excesses?

By Alan Wolfe's standards, a decent and honorable left would have cleanly excommunicated the Boston College professor long before he used the pages of the *New York Times Book Review* to demand the excommunication of a conservative for speech unbecoming a public intellectual. Happily, Wolfe's standards don't govern. And in a liberal democracy that cherishes open and vigorous public debate, they shouldn't.

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