

The Strong Must Rule the Weak:

A Philosopher for an Empire

By Jim Lobe | May 12, 2003

Is U.S. foreign policy being run by followers of an obscure German Jewish political philosopher whose views were elitist, amoral, and hostile to democratic government?

Suddenly, political Washington is abuzz about Leo Strauss, who arrived in the United States in 1938 and taught at several major universities before his death in 1973. Thanks to the “Week in Review” section of the May 4th edition of the *New York Times* and another investigative article in a recent *New Yorker* magazine, the cognoscenti have suddenly been made aware that key neo-conservative strategists behind the Bush administration’s aggressive foreign and military policy consider themselves to be followers of Strauss, although the philosopher—an expert on Plato and Aristotle—rarely addressed current events in his writings.

The most prominent is Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, now widely known as “Wolfowitz of Arabia” for his obsession with ousting Iraq’s Saddam Hussein as the first step in transforming the entire Arab Middle East. Wolfowitz is also seen as the chief architect of Washington’s post-9/11 global strategy, including its controversial pre-emption policy.

Two other very influential Straussians include *Weekly Standard* Chief Editor William Kristol and Gary Schmitt, founder, chairman, and director of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), a six-year-old neo-conservative group whose alumni include Vice President Dick Cheney and Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld, as well as a number of other senior foreign policy officials. PNAC’s early prescriptions and subsequent open letters to President George W. Bush on how to fight the war on terrorism have anticipated to an uncanny extent precisely what the administration has done.

Kristol’s father Irving, the godfather of neoconservatism who sits on the board of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) where a number of prominent hawks, including former Defense Policy Board chairman Richard Perle, are based, has also credited Strauss with being one of the main influences on his thinking.

While the *Times* article introduced readers to Strauss and his disciples in Washington, interest was further piqued this week by a lengthy article by *The New Yorker’s* leg-

endary investigative reporter, Seymour Hersh, who noted that Abram Shulsky, a close Perle associate who has run a special intelligence unit in Rumsfeld’s office, is also a Straussian. His unit, according to Hersh, re-interpreted evidence of Iraq’s alleged links to Osama bin Laden’s al Qaeda terrorist network and possession of weapons of mass destruction to support those in the administration determined to go to war with Baghdad. The article also identified Stephen Cambone, one of Rumsfeld’s closest aides who heads the new post of undersecretary of defense for intelligence, as a Strauss follower.

In his article, Hersh wrote that Strauss believed the world to be a place where “isolated liberal democracies live in constant danger from hostile elements abroad,” and where policy advisers may have to deceive their own publics and even their rulers in order to protect their countries.

Shadia Drury, author of 1999’s *Leo Strauss and the American Right*, says Hersh is right on the second count but dead wrong on the first.

“Strauss was neither a liberal nor a democrat,” she said in a telephone interview from her office at the University of Calgary in Canada. “Perpetual deception of the citizens by those in power is critical (in Strauss’s view) because they need to be led, and they need strong rulers to tell them what’s good for them.”

“The Weimar Republic (in Germany) was his model of liberal democracy for which he had huge contempt,” added Drury. Liberalism in Weimar, in Strauss’s view, led ultimately to the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews. Like Plato, Strauss taught that within societies, “some are fit to lead, and others to be led,” according to Drury. But, unlike Plato, who believed that leaders had to be people with such high moral standards that they could resist the temptations of power, Strauss thought that “those who are fit to rule are those who realize there is no morality and that there is only one natural right, the right of the superior to rule over the inferior.” For Strauss, “religion is the glue that holds society together,” said Drury, who added

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that Irving Kristol, among other neoconservatives, has argued that separating church and state was the biggest mistake made by the founders of the U.S. republic.

“Secular society in their view is the worst possible thing,” because it leads to individualism, liberalism, and relativism, precisely those traits that might encourage dissent, which in turn could dangerously weaken society’s ability to cope with external threats. “You want a crowd that you can manipulate like putty,” according to Drury.

Strauss was also strongly influenced by Thomas Hobbes. Like Hobbes, he thought the fundamental aggressiveness of human nature could be restrained only through a powerful state based on nationalism. “Because mankind is intrinsically wicked, he has to be governed,” he once wrote. “Such governance can only be established, however, when men are united—and they can only be united against other people.”

“Strauss thinks that a political order can be stable only if it is united by an external threat,” Drury wrote in her book. “Following Machiavelli, he maintains that if no external threat exists, then one has to be manufactured. Had he lived to see the collapse of the Soviet Union, he would have been deeply troubled because the collapse of the ‘evil empire’ poses a threat to America’s inner stability.”

“In Strauss’ view, you have to fight all the time (to survive),” said Drury. “In that respect, it’s very Spartan. Peace leads to decadence. Perpetual war, not perpetual peace, is what Straussians believe in.” Such views naturally lead to an “aggressive, belligerent foreign policy,” she added.

As for what a Straussian world order might look like, Drury said the philosopher often talked about Jonathan Swift’s story of Gulliver and the Lilliputians. “When Lilliput was on fire, Gulliver urinated over the city, including the palace. In so doing, he saved all of Lilliput from catastrophe, but the Lilliputians were outraged and appalled by such a show of disrespect.”

For Strauss, the act demonstrates both the superiority and the isolation of the leader within a society and, presumably, the leading country vis-a-vis the rest of the world.

Drury suggests it is ironic, but not inconsistent with Strauss’ ideas about the necessity for elites to deceive their citizens, that the Bush administration defends its anti-terrorist campaign by resorting to idealistic rhetoric. “They really have no use for liberalism and democracy, but they’re conquering the world in the name of liberalism and democracy,” she said.

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Straussian.org
<http://www.straussian.org/>

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