

Leo Strauss and the Rhetoric of the War on Terror

by
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A very curious piece appeared on the Op-Ed page of the *New York Times* on June 7, 2003. Its author was Jenny Strauss Clay, a professor of classics at the University of Virginia, and the title was, “The Real Leo Strauss.” Highlighted in a box midway down the page were the words, “My father was a teacher, not a right-wing guru.” Clay wrote,

Recent news articles have portrayed my father, Leo Strauss, as the mastermind behind the neoconservative ideologues who control United States foreign policy. He reaches out from his 30-year-old grave, we are told, to direct a ‘cabal’ (a word with distinct anti-Semitic overtones) of Bush administration figures hoping to subject the American people to rule by a ruthless elite. I do not recognize the Leo Strauss presented in these articles.

The “recent articles” had appeared in an array of magazines and newspapers, including the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *International Herald Tribune*, and *The New Yorker*. In only one of these does the term “cabal” appear. That one was Seymour Hersh’s *New Yorker* article, the opening line of which is, “They call themselves, self-mockingly, ‘The Cabal,’ a small cluster of policy advisers and analysts now based in the Pentagon’s Office of Special Plans.” Abram Schulsky, “a scholarly expert in the works of the political philosopher Leo Strauss,” directs this self-identified cabal, according to Hersh.

In Clay’s apologia on behalf of her father, she wrote, “My father was not a politician. He taught political theory, primarily at the University of Chicago.” It is not incidental that Leo Strauss rarely, if ever, referred to what he taught as political theory, but that is another thing that I will come back to. “He was a conservative insofar as he did not think that change is necessarily for the better,” which is a rather bland description of a conservative. “Leo Strauss believed,” she wrote,

In the intrinsic dignity of the political. He believed in and defended liberal democracy, although he was not blind to its flaws. He felt it was the best form of government that could be realized, 'the last best hope.' He was an enemy of any regime that aspired to global domination. He despised utopianism, in our time Nazism and communism, which is predicated on a denial of a fundamental and even noble feature of human nature, love of one's own. His heroes were Churchill and Lincoln.

Keep in mind a few of the things that come up in this paragraph. Among these is the notion of the "dignity of political." We still need to know exactly what Leo Strauss thought the political was, as well as what he thought liberal democracy was and in what sense he was a defender of it. The use of the word "regime" on the part of his daughter is not entirely innocent, as we will see later on, and the notion that Churchill and Lincoln were his heroes and on the other hand that Nazism and communism were the things that he abhorred—I am going to come back to all of those things in due course.

Prof. Clay went on to say, "The fact is that Leo Strauss"—and this is very important and is the reason why the issue here is ultimately of much more than academic interest—

Also recognized a multiplicity of readers, but he had enough faith in his author to assume that they, too, recognized that they would have a diverse readership. Some of their readers, the ancients realized, would want only to find their own views and prejudices confirmed. Others might be willing to open themselves to new, perhaps unconventional or unpopular, ideas. I personally think my father's rediscovery of the art of writing for different kinds of readers will be his most lasting legacy.

Strauss' students are aware of the impression their admiration for him makes on outsiders. Allen Bloom was the best known of those students thanks to his best-selling 1987 anti-egalitarian diatribe *The Closing of the American Mind*, and more recently to his having been "outed" by his old friend Saul Bellow in Bellow's novel, *Ravelstein*. In his tribute to his former teacher, published after Strauss's death, Bloom observed that "those of us who know him saw in him

such a power of mind, such a unity and purpose of life, such a rare mixture of the human elements resulting in a harmonious expression of the virtues, moral and intellectual, that our account of him is likely to evoke disbelief or ridicule from those who have never experienced a man of this quality.”¹ Bloom’s rhetorical strategy here of appropriating a projected criticism—the fawning admiration Straussians have for their teacher/founder and turning it around—also has the effect of demarcating an “out-group” that does not understand from an in-group that has experienced the truth, which is another characteristic feature of the style and substance of what makes a Straussian.

It is partly the aura that emanates from Strauss that gives credence to the claims of conspiracy when Straussians are involved in something, if that is in fact the claim that people make. More particularly, the prominence given to the notion of a charismatic founder within the Straussian fold means that it quickly begins to look like a cult.

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WHO WAS LEO STRAUSS? HE WAS BORN IN GERMANY IN 1899 and died in the United States in 1973. As was the case for many German Jewish intellectuals of his generation, he was active in Jewish youth groups in the 1920s. The ones that he was involved with were mostly inspired by the German nationalist youth movement. In Strauss’s case, he admired the sense of spiritual unity that was promulgated in these German youth groups and it was that sort of nationalist or spiritual element that was appealing to him. He wrote a book on Spinoza published in 1930 and left Germany in 1932 on a Rockefeller Foundation grant for research on Thomas Hobbes in Paris and London. He was thus in Paris when the Nazis took power. However, Strauss should not be confused with the anti-Nazi refugees who soon arrived in the French capital, because at this time he was a committed anti-liberal, in the German sense of anti-liberal, which is to say, among other things, an anti-parliamentarian. Also in 1932, he wrote an extended review of a book by the German legal and political theorist Carl Schmitt entitled *The Concept of the Political*, in which Schmitt articulated his notion that the core of the political problem is the distinction between friends and enemies. Schmitt later became a member of the Nazi party and a leading figure in the main legal organization of the Third Reich. In Strauss’s review, he criticized Schmitt from the political right. He argued that “the critique introduced by Schmitt against liberalism can . . . be completed only if one succeeds in gaining a horizon beyond liberalism. In such a horizon Hobbes completed the

foundation of liberalism. A radical critique of liberalism is thus possible only on the basis of an adequate understanding of Hobbes.”² His point was that Schmitt was, in his criticisms of liberalism, working within the bounds of liberal society because liberalism had become so dominant that it was difficult to see beyond it anymore, and it was thus necessary to go back to Hobbes to see what was there before. What was there before was a very strong sense of the absolute dichotomies of good and evil. For Strauss, Hobbes represents the foundation of liberalism and modernism in the claim that these notions of good and evil are nominalist; they simply do not exist in anything other than our judgment about them. So Strauss was suggesting that you had to go back before liberalism to reconnect with the sort of absolutist distinctions upon which Schmitt was attempting to ground the political.

While Strauss’s review of Schmitt’s book is fairly well known among scholars, the most striking document from Strauss’s early period is a letter he wrote in May 1933, to the German scholar Karl Löwith. Strauss wrote to Löwith five months after Hitler’s appointment as chancellor and a month after implementation of the first anti-Jewish legislation, that “just because Germany has turned to the right and has expelled us,” meaning Jews, “it simply does not follow that the principles of the right are therefore to be rejected. To the contrary, only on the basis of principles of the right—fascist, authoritarian, *imperial* [emphasis in original]—is it possible in a dignified manner, without the ridiculous and pitiful appeal to ‘the inalienable rights of man’ to protest against the mean nonentity,” the mean nonentity being the Nazi party. In other words, he is attacking the Nazis from the right in this letter. He wrote that he had been reading Caesar’s *Commentaries* and valued Virgil’s judgment that “under imperial rule the subjected are spared and the proud are subdued.” And he concluded, “There is no reason to crawl to the cross, even to the cross of liberalism, as long as anywhere in the world the spark glimmers of Roman thinking. And moreover, better than any cross is the ghetto.”

Two months later, in July 1933, he wrote to Schmitt—he did not realize that Schmitt had joined the Nazi party, or seemed not to fully understand what the regime was about in terms of its anti-Semitism—asking for help in getting entrée to Charles Maurras, the French right-wing Catholic leader of the *Action Française*. What all of this suggests is that in the 1930s Strauss was not an anti-liberal in the sense in which we commonly mean “anti-liberal” today, but an *anti-democrat* in a fundamental sense, a true reactionary. Strauss was somebody who wanted to go back to a previous, pre-liberal, pre-

bourgeois era of blood and guts, of imperial domination, of authoritarian rule, of pure fascism. Like Schmitt, what Strauss hated about liberalism, among other things, was its inability to make absolute judgments, its inability to take action. And, like Schmitt, he sought a way out in a kind of pre-liberal decisiveness. I would suggest that this description of fascist, authoritarian, imperial principles accurately describes the current imperial project of the United States. Because of this, examining the foundational elements of Strauss's political theory helps us to see something important about our current situation, independently of any kind of Straussian direct influence, although there is certainly some of that.

In 1935, Strauss published a book on Hobbes as well as a book entitled *Philosophy and Law*. The latter, on Maimonides and other Jewish themes, is the book in which he announced the discovery of what he called "the forgotten kind of writing," to which his daughter referred. This entailed writing for different kinds of audiences simultaneously. Strauss had been working on Maimonides and he came to the conclusion that in order to understand Maimonides he had to understand the writers to whom Maimonides was relating and that led Strauss to Alfarabi, the medieval Islamic philosopher. In these authors, and in Machiavelli and Spinoza, and ultimately in Plato, Strauss thinks that he discovered something about the way that they wrote. In an oral presentation entitled "A Giving of Accounts," recorded near the end of his life, he said, "I arrived at a conclusion that I can state in the form of a syllogism: philosophy is the attempt to replace opinion by knowledge, that opinion is the element of the city, hence philosophy is subversive, hence the philosopher must write in such a way that he will improve rather than subvert the city." That is, the philosopher has to conceal what he is actually doing.

In other words, the virtue of a philosopher's thought is a certain kind of *mania* [inspired frenzy], while the virtue of the philosopher's public speech is *sophrosyne* [discretion or moderation]. Philosophy is as such transpolitical, transreligious, and transmoral, but the city is and ought to be moral and religious. . . . To illustrate this point, moral man, merely moral man, the *kalosgathos* in the common meaning of the term [that is, the good man], is not simply closer to the

philosopher than a man of the dubious morality of Alcibiades.³

The suggestion here is that philosophy always has to go underground, to conceal itself in some way because philosophy deals with truth while society is based on opinion and truth subverts opinion. This is the basis of what Strauss calls a “philosophic politics.” In his book *On Tyranny*, about which I will have more to say below, he explains:

In what then does philosophic politics consist? In satisfying the city that the philosophers are not atheists, that they do not desecrate everything sacred to the city, that they reverence what the city reverences, that they are not subversives, in short that they are not irresponsible adventurers but good citizens and even the best of citizens. This is the defense of philosophy that was required always and everywhere, whatever the regime might have been.⁴

Philosophers have to convince the city that they are not subversive. What is entailed here is that philosophers such as Maimonides and the others that he described wrote for at least two different audiences. To one audience was addressed the so-called *exoteric* meaning of their texts, which was the edifying, superficial level, while to another audience was addressed an *esoteric* meaning, which is embedded in the text but which only some people are capable of drawing out. This “discovery” is what his daughter says is going to be his lasting contribution. Now there is something right about the claim that some writers conceal to some degree what their real intention is, but Strauss raised this observation to an art form, or thought that it was raised to an art form by the authors with whom he was dealing.

What is particularly interesting about this to me is that while he described this quite clearly in the middle 1930s, in his study of Alfarabi and Maimonides, he did not himself start to write in this mode until he came to the United States in 1936. This is an issue concerning Strauss that people gloss over too easily. The question, starkly posed, is why did Strauss himself start to write in this esoteric/exoteric manner only after he came to an “open” society, to the United States? It is often said that Strauss’s discovery was somehow situated in terms of the Nazi regime and its repression, but that does not explain why he would only revert to this kind of writing when he came here. I suggest that Strauss’s political position, which he articulated in

the letter to Löwith and in his critique of Schmitt, never fundamentally changed, but when he came to the United States it had to take on a more prudent presentation. Strauss's criticisms of liberal-democratic societies did not stop at liberalism but went all the way through to the core—he was, in other words, far more reactionary than many contemporary critics suggest.

The notion of esoteric and exoteric writing means that one has to read writers, as Strauss put it, “between the lines,” and he developed a very elaborate system of reading, which included silences, things that are not included in the text, and obvious errors or thematic points that appear to pop up out of nowhere. I do not want to get into this conception of writing too much, but to characterize it a little bit, Strauss held that the great books were written by authors who had complete and total control of their texts. Thus there are no errors, no false starts, everything is very tightly, beautifully constructed so that the initiated can pick up on little mistakes, little openings in the text and find their way in. Strauss himself adopted a system of using a great many interrelated footnotes and references and of quoting people whose position he would not overtly take while pointing to the fact that that was his position by other clues in the text, among other techniques. It is almost impossible to avoid the term Talmudic to describe the way in which he read and later wrote books. Two of his books are particularly instructive.

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STRAUSS'S *ON TYRANNY* WAS PUBLISHED IN 1948. This complex book consists of his translation of Xenophon's dialogue *Hiero*, also known as *Tyrannicus*, a work and an author whom Strauss considered unjustly ignored by modern scholars, along with an interpretive essay that partly decodes it and partly adds another layer or layers of convoluted meanings. In beginning his commentary, Strauss says that contemporary social science cannot identify the very tyranny that it faces. He writes of what he calls the modern form of tyranny that,

Not much observation and reflection is needed to realize that there is an essential difference between the tyranny analyzed by the classics and that of our age. In contradistinction to classical tyranny, present-day tyranny has at its disposal 'technology' as well as 'ideologies'; more generally expressed, it presupposes the existence of 'science,' i.e., of a particular interpretation, or kind, of science. Conversely, classical

tyranny, unlike modern tyranny, was confronted, actually or potentially, by a science that was not meant to be applied to 'the conquest of nature' or to be popularized and diffused. But in noting this one implicitly grants that one cannot understand modern tyranny in its specific character before one has understood the elementary and in a sense natural form of tyranny which is premodern tyranny. The basic stratum of modern tyranny remains, for all practical purposes, unintelligible to us if we do not have recourse to the political science of the classics.⁵

In reference to the structure of such a political science, which he sees as a subdivision of philosophy, he goes on to say that "socratic rhetoric is meant to be an indispensable instrument of philosophy, its purpose is to lead potential philosophers to philosophy, both by training them and by liberating them from the charms which obstruct the philosophic effort, as well as to prevent the access to philosophy of those who are not fit for it." Strauss then claims that,

The experience of the present generation has taught us to read the great political literature of the past with different eyes and with different expectations. The lessons may not be without value for our political orientation. We are now brought face to face with a tyranny which holds out the threat of becoming, thanks to 'the conquest of nature' and in particular of human nature, what no other tyranny ever became: perpetual and universal. Confronted by the appalling alternative that man, or human thought, must be collectivized either by one stroke and without mercy or else by slow and gentle processes, we are forced to wonder how we could escape from this dilemma. We consider therefore the elementary and unobtrusive conditions of human freedom.⁶

Strauss's warning that modern society is heading toward a kind of tyranny is not directed only toward Hitler and Stalin, toward fascism and communism; he is talking about the development of Western civilization generally: the diffusion of modern science and technology, the spreading of education throughout the entire population, the foundation of democratic claims in the notion of popular sovereignty. This is the beginning of the end of a certain notion of the political, of a certain relation to the world that Strauss wants to

reinvigorate. The tyranny that he is talking about when he is writing in 1948 is the tyranny that he experiences, or thinks he experiences, in the West. It is under the threat of that tyranny that he adopts this dual form of writing and this book is itself the great example of that form.

The other text, or collection of texts, from the period that is relevant here is entitled *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. It was published in 1952, but the essays in it were mostly written in the 1940s. And he says there of the literature of multiple meanings: “The fact which makes this literature possible can be expressed in the axiom that thoughtless men are careless readers, and only thoughtful men are careful readers.”⁷ Obviously, Strauss is writing for careful readers and careless readers are going to give up on his texts after a certain point. In that same book, he writes: “What attitude people adopt toward freedom of public discussion depends decisively on what they think about popular education and its limits. Generally speaking, premodern philosophers were more timid in this respect than modern philosophers.”⁸ Here again, Strauss identifies with the premodern philosophers, which is to say that his attitude toward popular education is completely negative. Strauss’s entire orientation here is a criticism of Western modernity. This becomes especially clear at the end of the passage from which I just quoted. He goes on to write, “Those to whom such books are truly addressed”—the esoteric books—

Are, however, neither the unphilosophic majority nor the perfect philosopher, as such, but the young men who might become philosophers: the potential philosophers are to be led step by step from the popular views which are indispensable for all practical and political purposes to the truth which is merely and purely theoretical, guided by certain obtrusively enigmatic figures in the presentation of the popular [i.e., exoteric] teaching—obscurity of the plan, contradiction, pseudonyms, inexact repetitions of earlier statements, strange expressions, etc. Such features do not disturb the slumber of those who cannot see the woods for the trees, but act as awakening stumbling blocks to those who can. All books of that kind owe their existence to the love of the mature philosopher for the puppies of his race, by whom he wants to be loved in turn. All esoteric books are ‘written speeches caused by love.’⁹

This last comment is one of the meanings of the “love of one’s own” to which Jenny Strauss Clay referred.

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RETURNING TO THE BIOGRAPHY, WE SEE THAT STRAUSS comes to the United States, gets a teaching position at the New School—his daughter said he was first and foremost a teacher, but he did not start teaching until he was thirty-eight years old and here in the United States—and then goes to Chicago in 1949 as professor of political philosophy. Now, his daughter said he taught political theory, but Strauss never said he taught political theory; he taught political philosophy. As Strauss understood it, political philosophy is the face that philosophy turns to the public. It is the way that philosophers address the public to convince them that they are not subversive at the same time that they are embedding another kind of message to those who will understand. Strauss went to Chicago in 1949, where he taught for twenty years, and it was there that he established his reputation.

This signals the establishment of Strauss as an academic influence in the United States. Up until this period I have been discussing his books alone. At Chicago he begins to have students, schooling them in the techniques of his own writing, including, perhaps most centrally, irony. However, for Strauss, what philosophers say to each other, to their friends, in conversation someplace out of the public realm is one thing; what they say in writing to any group beyond that is another. The exoteric/esoteric distinction applies only to writing, and so you find Strauss' students emphasizing the conversations with Strauss that they had in classes, and that means that the people who were students of Strauss have a privileged knowledge that the people who were not students of Strauss do not have. Thus one begins to see a kind of network build outward from his charismatic center, where the truth is spoken in small groups and seminar rooms, and then conveyed in secondary kinds of ways to a larger group after that.

Besides his teaching activities, Strauss rather skillfully turned his attention, after he got to the University of Chicago, to struggles within academe rather than struggles in the popular, political arena. Positioned in a social science department, he started attacking social science for its value neutrality. He and his associates began attacking elements of contemporary society through their supposed representation in social science and other academic disciplines rather than out in the open as a direct political attack, and doing it in a way that made it seem that he and his students and friends were defending the principles of liberal-democratic society at the same time. This collective

struggle was another element in the building of a Straussian network, one that continued after his death primarily through attacks on so-called multiculturalism and post-modernism.

The Straussian network is really an amazing thing. Any political theorist or anyone who has been around political science departments has seen it at work. Long before attaining public attention, the Straussians were often ridiculed for their cult-like qualities: they speak and write the same way, they write the same books on the same themes over and over again, they dress alike, they are almost all men, they went to the same schools—those sorts of things. It thus comes as a shock to discover that Leo Strauss may turn out to be the most influential political theorist of the last fifty years in the United States with respect to the exercise of political power.

If the Straussians were only one academic school among others, that would be one thing. But in the mid-1980s some commentators suddenly realized that they had begun to follow the lead of their liberal academic neighbors in heading for Washington, D.C. At that time, it was noticed that something strange was going on in the Reagan administration. The first sign of this was in an article by Stephen Toulmin, a historian of science, in the *New York Review of Books* in 1984, in the middle of a review of a book on Margaret Mead. Toulmin used Mead as an example to which he compared the then-current State Department policy planning staff, where, he said, they had more people who were acquainted with the writings of Leo Strauss than they were with the cultures that the State Department has to deal with.

Few people probably knew what he was talking about until Nathan Tarcov, a University of Chicago professor and a former student of Strauss, wrote a letter to the *Review* because he recognized himself in Toulmin's description and attempted to defend himself and the staff on which he served. Two years later the classicist F. M. Burnyeat, in another article in the *New York Review*, still possibly the best single piece anyone has written on the Straussians, took up the theme again and did a very thorough critique of Strauss's writings and the whole basis of the Straussian school. Burnyeat tackled the subject not just because it was an academic issue but because he knew there were influential Straussians in Washington. In the Reagan administration there were Tarcov, Carnes Lord, who was a member of the National Security Staff, and Paul Wolfowitz. Later on, William Kristol and Carnes Lord were part of Vice President Dan Quayle's staff. The Straussians clearly were aligning themselves with certain elements of the right-wing of the Republican Party.

Straussians have been around Washington for twenty years. In a sense, they invite the criticism of being a cult or a conspiracy by the networking that they do, by their purposive replication, and by the use of a certain kind of coded language. (For example, whenever Strauss talked about someone's theory he referred to his "teaching," and this is a term similarly deployed by all Straussians.) Strauss and his descendants use all kinds of stilted, oftentimes archaic language, and some of that language has found its way into the rhetoric of the so-called war on terror.

The most obvious place where one sees it is in the administration's use of the term "regime." Some people were surprised by what it turned out "regime change" meant, but one would not have been surprised if one were familiar with Leo Strauss's writings or those of the Straussians. "Regime" is the term that Strauss used to translate the Greek *politeia*, an Aristotelian category, and Strauss understood it to mean—what it more or less does mean in Aristotle—the form of a city; that is, its essence as opposed to the unformed humans, the matter, that the city forms. Aristotle, in Book Three of the *Politics*, makes the case that there are different kinds of polities—democracies, aristocracies, and so on—and that in each case, if one changes into another one it changes essentially; it changes its form into something else. And the citizens are different, they are changed—the citizen of a democracy is not a citizen in an aristocracy—so it is a total transformation of the city's essence, a formal transformation. Thus Strauss wrote that "a change of regime transforms a given city into another city," into something totally different. So to talk about "regime change," which was a relatively new term in the discourse of international relations, meant a total transformation of the model of the society in question rather than a simple change of government in the narrow sense. This has had immediate effects in the policy in Iraq.

But for Strauss, what was important about using this term is because in Strauss's mind it leads necessarily to the question of the "best" city. Strauss thought that if you start talking about fundamentally different forms, it necessarily leads you to begin comparing those forms, and the comparison leads you to a judgment about the best or worst sort of city. You see this, too, in the current discourse. On the one hand, the Bush administration always says it is not making judgments; on the other hand it is clear that there is a

preferred form for the transformation they seek to effect, which they call liberal democracy—a combination of market economics and the appearance of representative political institutions. So regime is one clear example of Straussian influence on the administration’s rhetoric and the thinking behind it. And indeed, William Kristol and a coauthor, in an article entitled “What Was Strauss up To?” point to the notion of regime as an instance of Strauss’s influence.¹⁰

Another important element is the “good versus evil” trope. Here William Kristol and Robert Kagan can show us the way toward an understanding. They coauthored an article in *Foreign Affairs* in 1996, entitled “Towards a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy.” They argued for the importance for conservatives to put moral judgments back at the center of American foreign policy, as Reagan had with the notion of the “evil empire.” Carnes Lord, to whom I referred above and who now teaches at the U.S. Naval College and who was a member of the Reagan administration and the Quayle staff as well as a translator of Aristotle, wrote an article in 1999, in which he argued that the crisis of liberalism as he understood it was a crisis of the political class, of the leadership in this country. He blamed the agenda of what he called “multiculturalism” in both domestic and foreign affairs for the fact, as he saw it, that we had lost our way in this country.

Straussians are dogged critics of what they call multiculturalism in academia in general and in the society as a whole, and the supposed spread of multiculturalism in American society was castigated by Lord both on the domestic and foreign levels. Thus there was the need for an effort, he wrote, aimed at “arresting the decline of American education, reviving a sense of citizenship and civic responsibility, and repairing vital national institutions such as the armed forces.” He was concerned that the next time there was a crisis and the president called us to sacrifice, will we be ready to do that? So the Straussians were talking about the need to infuse foreign policy with a moral language during both the George Bush and the Clinton administrations, and of course it came to fruition after September 11.¹¹

In this context, an Op-Ed piece written by William Bennett in the *Wall Street Journal* in September 2002, entitled “Teaching September Eleventh,” is worthy of note. Bennett wrote, “An appropriate response to September eleventh begins with a kind of moral clarity, a clarity that calls evil by its true name, terms like evil, wrong, and bad were rightly put back into the lexicon. September eleventh also requires that we point to what is good and right and

true. The dark day was pierced with rays of courage, honor, and sacrifice and they should be upheld for all to see, they too are enduring lessons.” That kind of reliance on courage, honor, these are pre-bourgeois, aristocratic kinds of categories and they fall into Strauss’s whole framework of the way “gentlemen” behave. Strauss saw the world divided up into three layers: there are the *vulgar*, there are *gentlemen*, and there are the *wise*. And honor and courage are the virtues of the gentleman; the virtue of the wise is wisdom. The wise need the gentlemen to be governing. And the gentlemen, this elite, do not operate with the categories of wisdom, but with the “simple virtues” that they are able to grasp and assert.

Another element of the administration’s rhetoric, of course, is the division of the world into friends and enemies. Strauss said the way of the philosopher is the way of Socrates; of the pursuit of wisdom, of the good in itself. But the way of the world is the way of Thrasymachus. And the argument for justice that Thrasymachus makes in Plato’s *Republic* is that justice is helping friends and hurting enemies. And this is in fact the moral compass that Straussians adopt in the world. It accounts, partly, for the network that they have constructed. And when the friends are philosophers then that is a really good thing, but if they are not philosophers, well, that is the way the world works anyway—you help friends, you hurt enemies. It is a form of realism, but it is realism in the hidden interests of wisdom. Now, this attitude and this kind of language do not only derive from Strauss, but it is notable the degree to which this administration, in particular, has articulated the world in terms of friends and enemies from September 11th on. That is the way the world has been divided by this administration, and it does what it can for its friends, regardless of what regime they may have, and it does what it can to its enemies, or what the administration perceives as its enemies, domestic and foreign.

The trickiest element in the current rhetorical structure of things is “tyranny.” As in the case of “regime,” one perked up one’s ears with the sudden ubiquity of the term tyranny. The term had not been used in contemporary political discourse until recently. Academic political science and public political discourse had used terms such as authoritarian or dictatorship or despotism to describe varieties of political domination throughout the last century. For the last half of it, the category of totalitarian was added. Despite Strauss’s effort in 1948, it is only now that tyranny has entered the speechwriters’ lexicon, and it seems clear that it is the work of Strauss’s descendants.

This is the most complicated part of Strauss's thinking and the most important in terms of understanding the current political situation. In the passage quoted above, Strauss referred to an ancient teaching on tyranny with which he contrasted a problematic modern tyranny. In the ancient teaching, which is the teaching with which he wishes to identify himself, it is possible for the wise man to move a tyranny toward its best possible form. That is, there are tyrannies and there are tyrannies; there are really bad ones and relatively good ones. The good ones are ones in which the tyrant rules beneficially for his subjects, but does so beyond the law. And Strauss says in his book, through the words of Xenophon, the author of the *Hiero*, that the rule of a good tyrant is better than misrule under law, so that tyrannical rule can be superior to constitutional rule or to the rule of misguided political elites. It is simply not the case that Strauss is entirely hostile to the notion of tyranny; he is hostile to the modern notion of tyranny, which is articulated in the passages already cited and then is further articulated by Strauss in his response to Alexandre Kojève's review of his book.

In Strauss's post-Nietzschean view, the modern form of tyranny leads necessarily to a flattening out of experience, to the so-called "last man." Society eventually becomes uninteresting when it is permeated by technology and science and a generalized level of education, the flattening out of experience that Tocqueville partly anticipated for democratic societies and which Nietzsche railed against. Strauss held out the hope, under those circumstances, for some rebellion, for acts of courage or honor to reverse this trend, this so-called tyranny. For Strauss, tyranny is a problem in the modern sense, not in the ancient sense, and I would suggest that his admiration for Churchill and Lincoln is because they actually mirror, to some degree, the ancient notion of the tyrant, especially Lincoln, who sidestepped the Constitution during the Civil War.

Straussians love Lincoln and they love him for a couple of reasons, one of which is that he was not reluctant to set the law aside when he felt it was necessary. But they also venerate Lincoln because he quite consciously set about the business of constructing a mythology about American identity, a patriotic mythology. Lincoln made the claim, in his Lyceum speech in 1838, that those who had had the experience of fighting for the establishment of the country in the Revolution were dying out as a generation and that future generations would have to revive this experience through myths and stories that they told about this founding generation. And that is what Straussians

do in terms of American culture, primarily through the myth of the Founding Fathers, the notion of this aristocratic elite that established America and the way that it is established. So Lincoln is a very important figure for them because he resorted to tyrannical measures when he had to and because he sought to mythically restore heroic virtues.

As for Churchill, who was also something of a tyrant, the issue is somewhat different. Churchill stood up to Hitler, and Hitler is a representative of the bad kind of tyrant. It is embedded in the Straussian notion of the vulgar that they are thoughtless readers but they can see things, you can construct images—Strauss develops this out of Plato's notion of the noble lie—that it is easier for people to see constructions and through them to glimpse the principles that lie behind them. And so what was important about Churchill was his image as a figure representing this opposition; that one could then begin to raise the question of good and evil by having this figure confronting Hitler, and then you label Hitler as evil and Churchill as good and you are into that dialectic of good and evil, which is so important to Strauss, and such a fundamental element of what he understood the political to be about; that is about struggle, about this sort of confrontation. So when Jenny Strauss Clay says her father was opposed to all kinds of utopianisms, and then she cites the Nazi and Communist ones, there is more to it than that. For some, there is the utopia of a peaceful world, a Kantian sort of utopia, of an end to conflict, of a resolution of grievances through peaceful means. For Strauss, that eliminates the struggle that is at the core of the political and which is necessary to be going on in the political realm while philosophers can be busy doing whatever it is that philosophers do.

One modern philosopher who is important in a complicated sort of way for Strauss is Martin Heidegger. Strauss says he encountered Heidegger for the first time in the early 1920s when Strauss “attended his lecture course from time to time without understanding a word, but sensed that [Heidegger] dealt with something of the utmost importance to man as man.” But despite his disclaimer of limited understanding, Strauss says that where he broke with Heidegger was with what Strauss called Heidegger's moral teaching, which he describes in this way: “The key term” in Heidegger's vocabulary “is ‘resoluteness,’ without any indication as to what are the proper objects of resoluteness. There is a straight line that leads from Heidegger's resoluteness to his siding with the so-called Nazis in 1933. After that I ceased to take any interest in him for about two decades.”¹² In this post-Nietzschean world, where nothing really matters anymore, one possible moral position to take is

to say: well, you choose something and you adhere to it with resoluteness; you affirm it, even though there is really no foundation for it other than your affirmation of it. Where Strauss differs with Heidegger is that Strauss wants to put truth in that place; the thing that you adhere to with resoluteness is truth. If you are going to hold society together, and keep it from becoming completely chaotic, you must affirm the notion of an absolute truth. And that is where he makes the break with Heidegger, though actually they are on the same ground. He is also on very similar ground to all of the political and philosophical movements that descend from Heidegger, including a voluntarist existentialism and deconstruction.

I do not want to leave the impression that I think that Straussians are the root cause of all of contemporary political problems. They have clearly contributed on the rhetorical level. They have helped codify certain notions, they have helped push a war of images; but I do not for a second think that there are no material interests at stake in American foreign policy. Perhaps what is most worrisome about the Straussian influence is the way in which some of this language has permeated public discourse generally and not just what is coming from this administration. Paul Berman, for example, in *Terror and Liberalism*, wants to characterize everything that is opposed to liberalism, as he understands it—a liberal sentiment—as “terror.” This is falling into the kind of dichotomous and problematic constructions that Strauss articulated.

Liberalism is itself fearful, in most instances, of popular power, of—for want of a better term—the power of the people. The big event in Allan Bloom’s life, aside from meeting Strauss and writing a best seller and becoming rich, happened at Cornell University, while he was teaching there, when armed black students took over the student center. In many respects, Straussian cultural criticism is a reaction against the counter-cultural and political movements in the 1960s, including the student movement. But there has been a liberal reaction to that, too. And a liberal discourse that talks about the need for civic education, that talks about the need for a patriotic discourse—Wesley Clark’s campaign talk about the need for a “new American patriotism” is an example—is really moving in the same area as the Straussian discourse. And there are some crossover types, as well. Mark Lilla, a professor in the Straussian redoubt of the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago and an associate director of the Olin Center there, published an article in the “liberal” *New York Review of Books* on the importance of the concept of tyranny. What is troubling in a lot of ways,

more than anything else, is that the Straussians have begun to dominate the terms of public discourse. A fearful liberalism and a political and punditry elite have been fertile ground for Straussian seeding. It was shocking in some ways when the *New York Times* hired David Brooks as a regular columnist, but it was not a shock when he very soon afterward wrote a column on the persecution of conservatives in American universities and interviewed Straussian professors to drive the point home. There is no conspiracy at work here, but rather a conflation of a Straussian and a liberal discourse that is really, really troubling. And both of them are fundamentally anti-democratic.

Notes

¹ Alan Bloom, "Leo Strauss," *Political Theory* 2:4 (1974): 372.

² Leo Strauss, "Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*," in Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, trans. J. Harvey Lomax (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 119.

³ Jacob Klein and Leo Strauss, "A Giving of Accounts," in Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 463.

⁴ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (New York: Free Press, 1991), pp. 205-6.

⁵ Strauss, *ibid.*, p. 23.

⁶ Strauss, *ibid.*, p. 27.

⁷ Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 25.

⁸ Strauss, *ibid.*, p. 33.

⁹ Strauss, *ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁰ Steven Lenzner and William Kristol, "What Was Leo Strauss Up To?" *The Public Interest* (Fall 2003).

¹¹ Carnes Lord, "Thoughts on Strauss and Our Present Discontents," in Deutsch and Murley, eds., *Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime*, pp. 413-17.

¹² Strauss, "A Giving of Accounts," p. 461.

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