

[*Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire*, Anne Norton, Yale University Press, 256 pages]

What Would Strauss Do?

By Michael C. Desch

AMERICANS ARE NOT intellectual people: we have just re-elected a president who prides himself on not reading the nation's leading newspapers. And yet, according to much breathless reporting and a new book by University of Pennsylvania political theorist Anne Norton, the anti-intellectual Bush administration is actually in the thrall of a cabal of intellectuals initiated into the mysteries of a conservative cult by an obscure émigré political theorist named Leo Strauss. Ironically, a nation of know-nothings is secretly guided by adherents of an esoteric political tradition rooted in a grand conversation among philosophers ranging from ancient Greece to Weimar Germany.

As the number of individuals in prominent government positions with ties to Strauss and his students has grown, interest in the impact of the late University of Chicago professor's thought has also increased. Articles have recently appeared in the *New York Review of Books*, *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *New York Times*, and many other periodicals. Books such as James Mann's *The Rise of the Vulcans* and Robert Devigne's *Recasting Conservatism* have also explored this subject. Norton's *Leo Strauss and the Politics of the American Empire* is thus part of a growing pile of paper.

Though Strauss died in 1973, concern about the influence of his disciples on American policy did not manifest itself until the Reagan administration. "Straussianism" was less evident in the first Bush and Clinton administrations, but Straussians are once again prominent under George W. Bush. The most well

known is Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, the architect of the Iraq War. But others, such as Abram Shulsky, the Director of the Pentagon's Office of Special Plans and Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, are also mentioned as conduits of Strauss's influence. Outside of government, *Weekly Standard* editor William Kristol and Project for the New American Century executive director Gary Schmitt are among the public intellectuals tied to Strauss or his students.

Norton's book is both analytical and autobiographical—she studied at the University of Chicago with Strauss's students and others who would later become prominent political Straussians. "I would never have thought of writing about [Straussians]," she begins, "but things changed. Certain of the people I had known came to power. The nation went to war. Because the nation is at war, and because the Straussians are prominent among those who govern, the accounts I had been given are no longer part of a curious personal history but elements of a common legacy."

One problem with the book is that it is based mostly on her recollections of things she heard and saw many years ago. The book, therefore, probably shares many of the evidentiary problems common to "recovered memories" and gossip. But its most significant weakness is that Norton never separates her personal experience, both positive and negative, with Straussians in graduate school from her analysis of Strauss's influence in Washington today. She remains deeply ambivalent about Strauss and never provides a clear answer the \$64,000 question: how much influence do the teachings of Strauss really exercise on the Bush administration?

I also studied at Chicago, but after Norton, and my specialty was international relations, not political theory. I did, however, take a few courses with prominent Straussians like Joseph Cropsey and Nathan Tarcov. For three years I was also a junior fellow in Allan Bloom's John M. Olin Center for the Inquiry Into the Theory and Practice of

Democracy, where I met many other academic Straussians including Leon Kass, Thomas Pangle, Clifford Orwin, Werner Dannhauser, and Ralph Lerner. Through the Olin Center, I also became acquainted with such political Straussians as Shulsky, Kristol, Alan Keyes, Frank Fukuyama, and William Galston. There is much I admire about academic Straussianism, but my intellectual and policy proclivities have taken me in a different direction.

Norton's reminiscences evoked a good deal of nostalgia for me. Her portrait of Cropsey, in particular, brought back fond memories of listening to him lecture on Plato's *Republic* with subtle wit and penetrating insight. Her account of the Straussians' distinct sense of hierarchy and their penchant for the *double entendre* also reminded me of the time Bloom called me a "hard-headed realist." Since I was by then enamored of realists like E.H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, and Kenneth Waltz, I might have taken this as an unqualified compliment. But as Bloom was a student of Friedrich Nietzsche, I knew that there was also a reminder in his remark that my practical bent may have led me to ignore more important philosophical issues.

In some places, Norton paints flattering portraits of Strauss and his academic followers—"The first students of Strauss I knew at Chicago were my professors Joseph Cropsey and Ralph Lerner. To listen to them read a text was to go into the garden, into a wilderness, into an ocean and breathe. They were scandalous, they were daring, they took your breath away with their honesty. They were precise, disciplined, ascetic, reverent, heretical, blasphemous, and fearless."

Like Mark Lilla in his two superb essays in the *New York Review of Books*, Norton distinguishes between Strauss and his academic followers and the political Straussians in Washington. The latter, in her account, are academic failures forced to settle for government jobs, who in their ignorance have tried to turn Strauss into a contemporary neo-conservative. For this she blames Bloom

for vulgarizing Straussianism and making it into little more than neoconservatism with a better intellectual pedigree.

In other places, Norton implicates Strauss more directly in the political agenda of his Washington epigones. First, she suggests that Strauss's adherence to "natural right"—the notion that justice should be based on nature rather than convention—led him to argue that because we are not all equally endowed with the same intellectual faculties, only select elites were fit to rule. Second, given the corrosive effect of this anti-egalitarian truth, Norton suggests that Strauss took his discovery that the great philosophers concealed their dangerous truths in their writings and recommended that policymakers do the same in speaking to us. Finally, Norton draws a line from Strauss's conclusion that war and struggle are necessary to bring out the best in man from his reading of Nietzsche and Carl Schmitt, to the neoconservatives' enthusiasm for establishing an American empire.

Writing in this vein, Norton sounds like Strauss critics such as Shadia Drury, who cast him as the Professor Moriarty of the neoconservative network. Proponents of this view point to two sets of links between Strauss's thought and the neoconservative agenda. Certain current

or former government officials either studied with Strauss himself (Shulsky and Wolfowitz) or with Strauss's students (Fukuyama and Kristol) and share a set of conservative premises. These include anti-communism; skepticism about the efficacy of international institutions; a preoccupation with the concept of the "political" as producing unending conflict; an endorsement of "natural right" as the foundation for domestic institutions; the belief that "virtue," as well as self-interest, matters in political life; a repugnance toward the relativism in modern liberal society; a marked skepticism about the potential for the physical and social sciences to fundamentally ameliorate the human condition; a pronounced anti-egalitarian stance; and a deep wariness about utopian political projects. Another potential area of common ground between Strauss and the modern neoconservative movement was his interest in the relationship between Judaism and modern liberalism and particularly his endorsement of Zionism.

However, the relationship between academic Straussianism and neoconservatism is much more complicated. There is no doubt that Strauss embraced some conservative political positions and preferred Goldwater and Nixon to

Kennedy and McGovern. But while Strauss may have been conservative in his practical politics, he was a philosophical radical. As he put it: "Philosophy is the attempt to replace opinion by knowledge; but 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."

For Strauss, Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger were the two great philosophers of late modernity. The fact that both were directly or indirectly linked to National Socialism must have made him acutely aware that mixing philosophical radicalism and practical politics can lead to disaster. Not surprisingly, Strauss concluded that prudence dictates that one choose between the life of philosophy (his choice) and sustained political engagement.

In contrast, the political Straussians, who have now become largely indistinguishable from neoconservatives, are radicals, clearly lacking the prudence that Strauss advocated in practical politics. Political Straussians and their neoconservative allies argue that the spread of democracy is a panacea for many of America's global problems. But the intellectual justification for such a policy could hardly have been Strauss, who was a critic of modern liberalism and democracy. Strauss maintained that political regimes encompass more than just their formal institutions but also depend upon the habits, mores, and customs of a society. It is hard to imagine that he would be sanguine about the prospects for the promotion of democracy in countries lacking these prerequisites. Indeed, Strauss's view ought to lead to caution, rather than enthusiasm, for making regime-change the cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy. To find philosophical support for such a policy, one has to look to liberal thinkers such as Kant or Montesquieu. As Lilla argues, what has happened since 1973 was not a Straussian takeover of neoconservatism but rather a hijacking of Strauss's thought or at least the kidnapping of some of his less astute students.

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Moreover, there are reasons political Straussians would have become neo-conservatives aside from exposure to Strauss's thought. Some, like Wolfowitz, came from family backgrounds similar to those of non-Straussian neoconservatives. Wolfowitz's father was a committed Zionist, as are many neoconservatives, and both father and son were at Cornell during the tumultuous sixties, when many Americans found other elements of the neoconservative agenda attractive. Though Wolfowitz did his graduate work at Chicago when Strauss was there, and even took a few classes with him, Mann and Norton both report that defense intellectual Albert Wohlstetter exercised a much greater influence over him. It was Wohlstetter who connected Wolfowitz with the emerging neoconservative policy network in Washington, D.C. in the early 1970s, where he would forge alliances with Richard Perle and Fred Iklé. In other words, many political Straussians could easily have become neoconservatives even if Strauss had never escaped Germany in the early 1930s.

Political theorist Paul Gottfried suggests that there is no difference between intellectual Straussianism and neoconservatism, a view Norton sometimes seems to echo. She focuses on Francis Fukuyama, author of the most influential political Straussian tract *The End of History*, who has also long been identified with neoconservatism. But this view that Straussianism inevitably leads to neoconservatism cannot explain Fukuyama's recent break with the neoconservative consensus on the Iraq War and Bush's foreign policy generally.

None of this is to suggest that those of us who are appalled by the neoconservative agenda will find Strauss fully congenial, but rather that he should not be dismissed as just a proto-neoconservative. Unfortunately, Norton's book might lead many readers to do just that. ■

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[*The Conservative Bookshelf: Essential Works That Impact Today's Conservative Thinkers, Chilton Williamson Jr., Citadel Press, 329 pages*]

The Best of the West

By Kevin Lynch

THIS IS A BOOKSHELF with exacting specifications. The volumes gathered here will not appeal to conservatives committed to the *status quo* or political pragmatism, nor to those who take their conservatism prefaced with a neo. These last may have penetrated the Reagan and Bush 43 administrations, but as Chilton Williamson explains, global crusades have never been conservative enthusiasms.

Williamson has distilled 50 works that represent the conservative canon, the best of the Western tradition. Accompanying each selection is an essay—this is not a book of excerpts—in which he states his case for including the work. A few of the writers here may appear more suited to another kind of bookshelf, but Williamson ably defends all his choices, including the most mischievous. Besides, after almost 14 years as literary editor of *National Review* and about as many as book-review editor and columnist for *Chronicles*, it has to be allowed that he has a passing acquaintance with conservatism in all its manifestations.

For Williamson, conservatism bears little resemblance to the caricature routinely drawn in the media. Modern society, he says, has largely succeeded in confining what is a broadly informed religious, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic tradition into a narrow party line. But conservatism involves more than maintaining Republican control of Congress and the White House. It permeates every aspect of man's life, from his religion, culture, and politics to his relations with his fellow man.

Citing Russell Kirk's dictum that cul-

ture arises from religion, Williamson accords religion first place, starting with the Bible. Though space is given to non-believers on this bookshelf, its builder is a man of faith, which he calls, I believe rightly, the dominant component of the conservative mind. For Christian conservatives, as well as those who profess no religion, the Bible is, he says, "the Book of Books, from which—however indirectly or confrontationally—all books since classical times have been made."

There are three other books in the religion category, two by Christians, C.S. Lewis (*The Abolition of Man*) and St. Augustine (*The City of God*), both brilliant defenders of the faith against the pagans of their day, the God-centered versus the self-centered, as someone has said. The final essay here is devoted to a surprising choice: *Meditations*, by the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. Born in AD 121, he was among the last of the Stoics, but in his aphorisms Williamson finds a "Saintly Pagan" who anticipates the ideals of the Christian ruler: fairness, liberality, humanity, Christian wisdom and judgment, and self-control. "When you are outraged by somebody's impudence," Marcus Aurelius writes, "ask yourself at once, 'Can the world exist without impudent people?' It cannot: so do not ask for impossibilities." Williamson acknowledges, however, that the emperor had a dark side. When it came to Christians, his vaunted self-control escaped him. He persecuted them savagely. This explains why among his sayings nowhere can be found the maxim that if you can't walk the walk, don't talk the talk.

After religion comes politics, the book's largest category, with essays on 13 works that unarguably belong in the canon. Here a distinction made early in the book between types of conservatives becomes apparent. There are pragmatic ones whose beliefs differ little from their liberal neighbors', and then there are those whose beliefs are founded uncompromisingly on eternal principles. For clarity, these last Williamson describes as Rightists (or paleoconservatives, to be sure there is no confusion with the neo-