Leo Strauss: The European

Mark Lilla

The year 2003 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the death of Leo Strauss, the influential German-Jewish thinker who spent half his life teaching and writing in the United States. Three superb studies of Strauss's thought were published last year in continental Europe, where his posthumous reputation has grown steadily in recent years. In Germany the first three volumes of his collected works have now appeared, revealing a young Strauss en-gaged in Zionist polemics and absorbed with what he called the "theological-political problem." They also bring him closer to the world of his contemporaries like Ger-shom Scholem and Karl Löwith, with whom he maintained a lively correspondence. All this publishing activity has helped to establish Strauss as one of the great minds to have emerged from the rich culture of Weimar.

But that was not the Leo Strauss discussed and rumored about in the United States last year. In the lead-up to the recent Iraq war the attention of the press concentrated frantically on the neoconservative foreign policy establishment in Washington in hopes of finding its intellectual roots. As seems to happen whenever the mainstream press finally pays attention to conservative intellectuals, old pictures of the diminutive Strauss were extracted from the archives to accompany articles exposing him as the master thinker. Journalists who had never read him trawled his dense commentaries on ancient, medieval, and modern political thought looking for incriminating evidence. Finding none, they then suggested that Strauss never wrote what he thought, that his secret antidemocratic doctrines were passed on to adepts who subsequently infiltrated government. At the ideological fringes the term "cubal" was occasionally employed, in ignorance (one hopes) of its anti-Semitic connotations.

The nadir of this episode was reached when the demagogue Lyndon B. Johnson LaRouche published a hysterical pamphlet on the Strauss connection that also made the rounds on the Internet. I encountered LaRouche's followers between classes one day on the campus of the University of Chicago, where Strauss once taught. They had a sound truck blaring an incomprehensible message into the quad, while acolytes passed out copies of the pamphlet, titled "Children of Satan." A wild-eyed young woman pushed one into my hands, demanding, "You're not a Straussian, are you?" Before I could respond she declared, "Leo Strauss was a fascist."

Several of Strauss's academic disciples responded in print to these bizarre charges, trying to explain that his writings were concerned with the fundamental issues of political life—justice, modernity, virtue, authority—not with partisan matters. They were joined by Strauss's daughter, the classicist Jenny Strauss Clay, who wrote in The New York Times, that simple scholar who "believed in and defended liberal democracy" and whose "heroes were Churchill and Lincoln" could be sneered at in this way. "If only the truth had the power to make the misrepresentations of his achievement vanish like smoke and dust," she wrote wistfully.

Yes, if only. But that is not likely to happen soon because Strauss's achievement was a mixed one. When Strauss died thirty years ago, he left behind two legacies: that of a thinker and that of a teacher. His books are read all over the world today, but his pedagogical activity, and its effects, have been limited to North America. Over three decades in the classroom, Strauss managed to acquire a large, sometimes fractious, but deeply devoted following of American students, many of whom also became teachers. A "Straussian" school developed in universities, mainly in political science departments, and it is now three or four generations old. In recent decades younger members of the school have turned their attention increasingly to Washington, with many serving at the highest levels of government, almost exclusively in Republican administrations, and others playing central roles in the neoconservative intellectual-political-media foundation complex that has become so influen-
tial since the 1980s.

How and why has this happened? The new European books on Leo Strauss, which will be examined in this article, take us a long way toward answering this question. Because they are written by scholars who take Strauss with the utmost seriousness but are untouched by the pedagogical and political activities of the American Straussian school, they succeed in excavating his deepest philosophical insights without putting them to partisan use. They give us, for the first time, a Straussianism not mysterious. In so doing they make it possible to see the political drift of his American school, which grew up in a highly contentious period of our history, as an independent phenomenon. They help us to see that there is indeed a story here—about late-twentieth-century American political and intellectual life. If not about Leo Strauss. That story will be the subject of a subsequent article.

Leo Strauss was born into a rural Jewish family outside Marburg, Germany, in 1899. His boyhood ambitions, he once remarked, were simple and pastoral: to become a country postman, raise rabbits, and read Plato. His family was observant but not educated, and after serving in the First World War Strauss drifted into Zionist circles and began writing for their political publications. (A number of these articles, reprinted in the Gesammelte Schriften, have since been translated into Michael Zank's edition of writings from Strauss's early years.) Strauss studied philosophy in several German universities, eventually writing his dissertation under Ernst Cassirer in Hamburg, though in his letters he maintained that Nietzsche was his only teacher in those years. The one encounter that impressed him was that with Martin Heidegger, whose lectures Strauss attended in Freiburg. Like many members of his generation he was deeply marked by Heidegger's debate with Cassirer at Davos in 1929, a debate that began over Kant and ended in a useful list was compiled by Kenneth L. Deutsch and John A. Morley, editors of Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime (Rowman and Littlefield, 1999). On it are included the following people and groups: "influenced by Leo Strauss and his students"; chairman of the US Civil Rights Commission, acting chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, associate deputy secretary of state for human rights, assistant secretary of state for international affairs, director of the National Advisory Board of Foreign Intelligence, as well as a large number of presidential and vice-presidential advisers, members of the National Security Council, defense analysts, advisers to cabinet secretaries, and former presidential candidate, Alan Keyes. It is worth noting the paradox that most of these people served in the Reagan and Bush Sr. administrations, when their presence was little remarked, and that there are probably fewer Straussians in the current Bush administration.
deep disagreement over the nature and future of philosophy.

From the start, however, Strauss was aware that the life of philosophy could never be a simple matter for a thoughtful Jew aware of his people's history. Late in life he addressed this problem in a remarkable essay that became the preface to the English translation of his book on Spinoza. This extraordinary document is a phenomenology of the modern Jewish spirit, describing from within the intellectual steps by which German Jews had moved from orthodoxy to liberal assimilation in the nineteenth century, then to Zionism and the "new thinking." From Binyon Zweig and other messianic writers in the early decades of the twentieth. 

This story had been told before from a purely historical standpoint as a struggle between orthodoxy and Enlightenment. Strauss saw in it instead what he called a "theological-political problem." Strauss often remarked that although politics can address familiar problems it can never resolve the fundamental contradictions of life. Those contradictions have their source in the human need to answer the existential question: "How should I live?" - a supra-political question giving rise to stark alternatives. In the West, those alternatives were seen in philosophy and divine revelation, the lives of Socrates and Moses. The tension between them was, in Strauss's view, the hidden wellspring of our civilization's vitality. But the thinkers of the modern Enlightenment, horrified by religious war and frustrated by the otherworldliness of classical philosophy, tried to reduce that tension. They mocked religion, advocated toleration, and tried to drive the discordant phrases, found in Strauss's youthful critique of the jurist (and later Nazi apologist) Carl Schmitt, is often quoted by critics who charge Strauss with being a partisan of non-belief. Here the statement takes on its real significance, which is intellectual and existential. The problem with the Enlightenment's liberal aspiration to take religion out of the political and thereby pacify human existence was, in Strauss's view, that it distorted our understanding of the human condition: "The Jewish question," he wrote, "cannot be understood in the Enlightenment's hope that politics could be isolated from supra-political claims. The principle leading to emancipation—that, to quote from the debate in the French National Assembly of 1789, "the Jews should be denied everything as a nation, but granted everything as individuals"—proved untenable; the call of revelation could not be extinguished by political or politics. And that, for Strauss, meant that philosophy needed to reconsider the original "theological-political problem." 

2. The great virtue of the new European studies of Strauss is that they have put his scholarly writing clearly within this larger setting. The books by Daniel Tanguy and David Jan

sen do so by following the step-by-step development of Strauss's ideas and writings, especially in the Thirties and Forties. In his Eastern essay, remarkably, no American Straussian has thought to undertake. Both books rely heavily on the editorial and interpretative work of Howard Harris, the first American edition of Strauss's writings, and the author of two concise, synthetic explications of Strauss's theory. Anyone who has tried to read Strauss unreconstructedly or even entirely on his own will find it impossible to grasp the relations among his works, given the extraordinary range of his writings: studies of Plato, Aristotle, and Xenophon, as well as a book on Aristophanes; learned articles on medieval Jewish and Muslim philosophers, such as Maimonides and the less well known Alfarabi; major books on Machiaveli, Hobbes, and Spinoza; foundational studies in political thought, culminating in his best-known work, Natural Right and History (1953); and his scattered essays on Judaism, the "crisis of modernity," and the nature of philosophy. Meier, Tanguy, and Janssens have found a plausible way to make it all fit, and in so doing they distance Strauss from his more partisan American interpreters.

Tanguy, who was French-Canadian but was trained in France, is particularly good at tracing Strauss's development in an accessible way. He focuses on the Jewish question as a "theological-political" problem and Strauss's early conviction that one needs to find a "higher" understanding of the fundamental philosophical questions. Tanguy argues that Strauss's work could not have been written without a knowledge of the political and legal philosophy of the modern world. He also shows how Strauss's later work is more nuanced and complex than many have given him credit for.
compatible. This esoteric lesson is also doubly beneficial. It teaches the reader that genuine philosophy can and should be kept free from all theological and political conventions; it also teaches him by example how to establish relations that are both esoteric and erotic with conventional authority and with potential students of philosophy. The achievement of Alfarabi was to have demonstrated how philosophy can be both free, if understood esoterically, and politically responsible.

This was what Tagguy calls the “Farabian turn” in Strauss’s thought. After making the turn Strauss then worked back in time, developing an idealized picture of an “ancient” or “classical” philosophical tradition that was also esoteric. The ancients, he claimed, sought a rational account of nature in a way that simultaneously undermined the less than rational character of political life, which is dominated by opinion and passion. He then moved forward to show, or claimed to show, how this understanding of the philosophical life disappeared in the modern era. Strauss’s theory of esoteric writing and esoteric reading is extremely controversial among classicists, historians of modern thought, and few seem to have read his book on the subject, Persecution and the Art of Writing (1952). Most find his interpretations and those of his students to be arbitrary, sometimes perverse, and, more importantly, flattening, since they all seem to arrive at the same conclusions about the philosopher and the city, nature and convention, and the need for esotericism itself.

Many of these charges are justified. What is unfortunate is that controversy over this subject has obscured Strauss’s larger aim, which was to restate older works in order to challenge the way we conceive of ourselves today. His interpretations try to suggest that the truly radical nature of Socratic questioning had been domesticated and routinized by modern Enlightenment philosophy, and that this was a loss, not a gain. Through the new philosophy of the Enlightenment we have learned to master nature and be.


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Mark Lilla

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In a previous article I discussed a number of new European studies of the thought of Leo Strauss, the German-Jewish thinker who spent the second half of his life teaching and writing in the United States. Those studies reveal a very “European” Strauss, concerned with Zionism and the Jewish question, the legitimacy of the modern Enlightenment, the rival claims of philosophy and revelation, and most fundamentally the possibility of restoring the Socratic practice of philosophy as a way of life. This Strauss is very little known or understood among the wider public. Indeed, his name has been associated in recent decades almost exclusively with the activities of his American disciples, many of whom are deeply involved with Republican and neoconservative policies. This has led to wild speculation about Straussian influence in American government, even the suggestion that Strauss’s “esoteric” method of reading texts might lie behind a duplicitous foreign policy, especially in the recent Iraq war.

Most of these charges are patently absurd. What is not absurd, and deserves reflection, is the genuine connection that seems to exist between Strauss’s self-proclaimed disciples and highly partisan factions in American public life. If the European interpreters of Strauss’s thought are to be believed, he taught that there was a fundamental tension between the life of philosophy and that of the city, and while philosophers might have to behave responsibly in light of that tension, ideological partnership was a temptation to be avoided.

This is not the way many of Strauss’s American followers see the matter today, as we see if we examine the essays collected a few years ago in Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime. In that book, Mark Blitz, a former associate director of the United States Information Agency during the Reagan years who now teaches at Claremont McKenna College, a Straussian stronghold, tries to isolate “the elements in Strauss that prepared and allowed an affinity with conservatives.” He finds the following:

anti-communism (and not amelioration), the virtue of individual responsibility (and not excessive social welfare), individual rights (and not affirmative action or feminism), market competition (and not excessive regulation or quasi-oligarchy), and educational and artistic excellence (and not “politicization” or self-indulgence).2

While it is true that Strauss was opposed to communism, spoke of virtue, and was concerned with educational excellence, there is not a word in his works about such topics as welfare, affirmative action, feminism, and the like. Not a word, as Blitz himself admits. Why, then, do so many of his disciples act as if the political implications of his thought point them in one partisan direction? Why is it that his European readers, who study his books but have no connection with the pedagogical tradition Strauss began in America, find no such partisan drift? And who is right? To answer these questions we need to take a closer look at Leo Strauss in America.

Strauss arrived in the United States in the middle of his life, at the age of thirty-eight. He had spent most of the 1920s as an itinerant German scholar, working and teaching at various Jewish research centers while working on Spinoza and Maimonides. His circumstances finally changed in 1932 when he received a Rockefeller grant to do research in Paris, where he remained until 1934, and then in England, where he lived until 1937. In view of what was unfolding in Germany, the grant may have saved his life. Strauss published a much-admired book on Hobbes while in England, a country he loved, and, to judge by his correspondence, where he would have preferred to remain. But he had no academic prospects there, or in Palestine, where his friend Gershom Scholem failed to secure him a position. In the end, Strauss looked to America, a country he had expressed no interest in until then. After spending a short time as a research fellow at Columbia University he obtained his first fixed teaching post at the New School for Social Research in 1938, where he spent ten obscure but intellectually productive years. In 1949 Strauss left the New School for the University of Chicago, where he would remain for the next two decades building the devoted student following that became “the Straussians.”

Strauss came to Chicago at a unique moment in the history of American higher education. The Second World War had just ended, Nazism had been defeated, and the cold war with Soviet communism had begun. The universities were expanding, both in size and in reach, by admitting people who had previously been excluded. In such a context one can imagine students’ excitement when a short, unassuming foreigner with a high-pitched voice entered the classroom and began analyzing the great books, line by line, claiming that they treated the most urgent existential and political questions—and that they might contain the truth.

The effect would have been intensified for Jewish-American students, who, at a time when cultural assimilation still seemed the wisest course, found themselves before a teacher who taught Judaism and the philosophical tradition with equal seriousness and dignity. Strauss’s method was famous for its simplicity and directness. (We know this from tramps and transcripts of his later courses, which circulate among his disciples.) A student would be asked to read a passage from the work in question; Strauss would make a comment or two, noting contradictions or discrepancies with earlier passages; a student might then raise a question, which would lead Strauss to digress, taking it to a much higher level and illustrating it with often earthy examples. (He was particularly fond of examples from Ann Landers’s column.) Then on to the next passage. And that was all. No attempt was made to force Strauss’s thought into an arbitrary historical context; nor were there appeals to disembodied streams of thought. The only relevant questions were: What did Aristotle, or Locke, or Nietzsche say in this work? And, on a generous reading, could be possibly be right?

In a charming memoir of his time at Chicago, Werner Dannhauser described the experience of studying with Strauss as “becoming naïve again.”3 For Dannhauser, Strauss’s greatest pedagogical achievement was to have shown his students how to become attentive readers and to take their own experience seriously, free from preconceived notions or rebarbative jargon:

We learned to trust the superiority of proverbs again; we learned to talk in simple words again. Instead of “values,” we talked of good and bad; we discussed unhappiness rather than alienation, and things ceased to be dysfunctional—they just did not work.

Recaptured naïveté is a nod to Romantic trope, as Strauss knew perfectly well. But it also bears some relation to the kind of open Socratic questioning he held out as a philosophical ideal in his Weimar years.

As a response to the “low dishonest atmosphere” of the Thirties and then the monstrous total war in Europe and Asia, one understands its appeal. The problem proved to be that Strauss was teaching young Americans, for whom these developments were remote. Discovering Strauss, they were less like prodigals returning home from distractions than young pilots discovering the world beyond the city’s walls. Had Strauss returned to continental Europe to teach after the war, his students already would have studied the history of philosophy, however superficially, in high school. That might have made them more difficult to reach, plunging them deeper into what he called the “second cave” of historicism and relativism. But in return they probably would have been more inclined—as are the authors of the new European studies of Strauss—to see him as a thinker exploring the philosophical tradition for his own purposes. His American followers have had difficulty seeing him in that light.


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as an original thinker whose example might help them down their own paths. They treat him less like Socrates than like Moses.

Strauss's seminars were almost always devoted to single philosophical works not to large swaths of intellectual history. But shortly after arriving at Chicago he was asked to deliver the prestigious Walgreen Lectures, which were first published in 1963 as Natural Right and History. This work, his most influential, must be considered the founding document of the Straussian school. It was, so to speak, Strauss's argument for citizenship and his way of accepting his academic chair in political science.

In it he developed a number of original theses about the history of political philosophy, all directed against standard Whiggish accounts that described a steady rise from classical, to medieval Christian, to early-modern authoritarian, to late-modern democratic and socialistic thought. Strauss claimed that, properly viewed, there was a coherent tradition of "classical natural right," running from Socrates to Thomas Aquinas, who shared more than one might think. The assumption of this classical tradition, ancient and medieval, was that there is a distinction between nature and convention, and that justice is what accords with the former, not the latter.

Whether the rules of nature are discovered through philosophy or revelation, whether one account of nature is more persuasive than another, all this is less important, according to Strauss, than the conviction that natural justice as the highest human possibility is indeed the standard, and that without it we cannot understand or criticize the conventional arrangements in which we find ourselves. What Machiavelli represented, in Strauss's view, was a great rebellion against this standard—not against Christianity but against the tradition of classical natural right as a whole. Once that break was made it was only a matter of time, Strauss argued, before modern thought—after making intermediate stops at Locke's liberalism and Rousseau's Romanticism—descended into historicism and nihilism.

Natural Right and History, a dense and brilliant argument, is put forward with unusual panache yet without sacrificing Strauss's characteristic directness and irony. Although it treats the history of political philosophy, it does so in a way that forces the reader to think hard about fundamental questions. Whether it convinces is another matter. Critics have charged Strauss with ignoring the very different contexts in which his authors wrote, with underappreciating, if not ignoring, Christianity's break with the classical past and the ancient roots of early-modern discussions of human rights and limited government, and with many other errors. And even Strauss's students admit that his treatment of natural rights might be difficult to square with his own treatment of Socratic philosophy, which he depicts as suspending all simple appeals to nature.

But the real problems with Natural Right and History are not historical, they are pedagogical. Its effects on Strauss's American disciples have been stultifying. In a little more than three hundred pages, the book offers students unfamiliar with any other account of philosophy's history an epic, just-so version of it, tracing our intellectual decline from the golden age of Athens to the modern age of iron. It is a script, but unlike the script one might be taught in a European high school, along with others, this script gave the United States an important place in the unfolding of a single story.

Strauss introduced the book with the words of the Declaration of Independence, "we hold these truths to be self-evident," and then asked: Do we still? Does the contemporary West still believe in natural "inalienable Rights," or do we rather believe, as Strauss dryly puts it, that "all men are endowed by the evolutionary process or by a mysterious fate with many kinds or urges of aspirations, but certain also that it is right?" If the latter, doesn't that mean that modern liberalism has declined into relativism, and isn't that indistinguishable from the kind of nihilism that gave rise to the political disasters of the twentieth century? "The contemporary rejection of natural right leads to nihilism," Strauss writes, "nay, it is identical with nihilism." As a rhetorical device for revealing the apparently antithetical task of recovering classical philosophy, this introduction succeeds brilliantly. But it also raises the peculiar thought that such an enterprise is trapped up with American destiny.

Strauss never wrote a single essay about American thought and only a few shorter pieces on "the crisis of our time," forgettable exercises in Weimar Kulturphilosophismus that display little feel for American life. After Natural Right and History he spent most of his time at Chicago teaching courses on important European figures in the history of philosophy, concentrating mainly on their political works. Some of his students, though, perhaps inspired by that book, turned to American political thought in earnest, and their influence subsequently became large. For the first two decades of his teaching, Straussianism remained a marginal, if not an academic, phenomenon. During the first two decades of his Chicago period, Strauss's American students were mainly interested in refining and revising la querelle des anciens et modernes, and adapting an aristocratic understanding of the philosophical life to the slightly vulgar American democratic setting. That's not to say that Strauss was at all aground but it was roughly consistent with Strauss's own scholarly activity, the main difference being the missionary zeal and rhetoric of moral uplift that sometimes suffused their work. There were odd examples of Strauss's students getting involved with contemporary politics (one wrote speeches for Barry Goldwater) and it was often the case that conservatives were drawn to him because of his skepticism toward modern ideas of progress and his hostility to communism. But so were cold war liberals who shared his admiration for Lincoln and wanted to have a clear understanding of liberal democracy's weaknesses in order to protect it. Most were

probably Democrats in those years and supported the civil rights movement, but the school remained scholarly, not partisan.

After 1968, all that changed. The universities imploded, and Straus- sianism took a new turn. It is difficult for those of us educated on the other side of that cultural and academic trauma to imagine the trauma experienced by some of those teachers wrenched to the pre-'68 American university, however sympathetic their loss we might be. Their sense of betrayal is inarticulate and will not be consoled. Straussians in the universities took the student revolts, and all that followed in American society, particularly hard.

From the start they had learned to see education as a necessarily elite enterprise, one difficult to maintain in a leveling, democratic society. But thanks to Natural Right and History, they were prepared to live with the threat of "nilihim" lurking in the interstices of modern life, waiting to be released, turning America into Weimar.

This was the formidable phenomenon underlying Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind, and helps to explain why its genuine insights about American youth got buried in apocalyptic doomsaying and a variety of other erroneous conclusions. Influential Straussians spent the Sixties at Cornell, which had a particularly ugly experience with student violence, race-baiting, and liberal cowardice in the face of political pressure. Buildings were seized, faculty were threatened, the university's president assaulted. That moment seems to have been a revelation for Bloom, opening his eyes to the possibility that "whether it be Nuremberg or Woodstock, the principle is the same" and that "Enlightenment in America came close to breathing its last during the sixties.

In the wake of the Sixties, and after Strauss's death in 1973, one began to see a new, more political catechism developing among certain of his disciples. Some Straussians remained non-partisan and to this day devote themselves to teaching old books for their own sake; many others, traumatized by the changes in American universities and society, began gravitating toward the circles of neoconservatives then forming in New York and Washington. The catechism these political Straussians began to teach was simple: students are nowhere recorded, and not because there is a secret doctrine being passed around by esoteric means. Rather, the catechism permeates the way one thinks about Strauss's work, and therefore about themselves, that its philosophical and political tenets need not be articulated. It begins with the assumption that modern liberal West is in a crisis, unable to defend itself intellectually against internal and external enemies, who are abetted by historical relativism. This crisis obliges us to be finite; they cannot think something reached such an impasse, which takes us back to the break with classical thought. There we discover the prudently characterized nature of the text.

The best distillation of it can be found in the essay on Strauss by Nathan Tarcov and Thomas L. Pangle, which serves as an epilogue to History of Political Philosophy (University of Chicago Press, third edition, 1987), the reader first compiled by Strauss and Joseph Cropsey in the Sixties and still in print.

The Straussians, with contempt for teachers and fellow students who aren't with the program. And for those who go on to graduate study, their lack of curiosity and independence blocks them at almost every turn. Straussians complain bitterly about their trouble finding academic work, attributing it to "a systematic political smearing as for nothing, as blacklist," as one put it. There certainly is prejudice against Straussians in those universities where conservatives are still being treated like untouchables. But there is also experience with Straussians, and it has been mixed. At a time when university professors are often more interested in following academic fashions than in teaching students classic works on fundamental human problems, it can be refreshing to have Straussian colleagues who love teaching and have something to say about those problems. That certainly has been my experience. But in other, less happy places, the Straussian habit of forming dogmatic cliques with students and people one has come to trust with personal relations, making potential colleagues wary of hiring them. The kind of scholarly the Straussians typically produce also makes it difficult for them to advance. Their dissertations and books—which they have trouble finishing, given the weight of Strauss's example—range from onerous exercises in esoteric analysis to solid interpretations of well-known classics. Some of the latter are extremely useful but rarely display

"Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime, p. 71"
by a neocconservative establishment eager for recruits.

American neocconservatism exists in a beltway within the Washington Beltway. It is a world unto itself, intellectually and socially, past two thinking foundations, think tanks, advocacy groups, magazines, and consulting firms, not to mention people in government who work as advisers, speechwriters, and mid-level bureaucrats. A number of books have been written about the movement, none of which quite captures its metamorphosis from a loosely connected network of professors and magazine editors into a well-integrated force shaping American public policy.

The neocconservative impulse was originally a moderating one, arising from a sense that American liberalism needed a reality check. Great Society programs, it was said, were exacerbating problems they were meant to solve, such as poverty and urban blight; rising taxes were stoking economic prosperity; moderate-class values were being vilified, driving voters to the right; the “Vietnam syndrome” was paralyzing American foreign policy. Over the past two decades these criticisms have become commonplace in American politics; with the election of Bill Clinton it appeared that we were (nearly) all neocconservatives now. Except for the neocconservatives themselves, who in the interim abandoned the moderate liberalism they once championed, for a coarse provincial ideology giving them enormous influence in Washington.

Neoconservatives used to give two cheers for capitalism, now four or five seem hardly sufficient. They once promoted a hard realism in foreign policy, to counteract the pacifist idealism they saw among Democrats in the Seventies; now they fight with an ecclesiastical faith in America’s mission civilisatrice, to be fulfilled by military means. They once offered a complex view of bourgeois culture in its relation to economic and political life; now they are in the grip of an apocalypse vision of post-sixties America that prevents them from contributing anything constructive to our culture. How these eschatological and apocalyptic ideas about America can exist in the same breast, without some effort at reconciliation, remains a mystery to every outsider who glances at a neocconservative magazine today. They appeal, though, to political Strausians, whose hearts beat arhythmically to both Sousa and Wagner.

Traditional American conservatism was anti-intellectual; neoconservatism is counter-intellectual. That is the source of its genius and influence. Unlike traditional conservatives who used simply to complain about left-leaning professors, judges, bureaucrats, and journalists, the neoconservatives long ago understood that the only way to resist a cultural elite is to replace it with another. So they have their own parallel universe, mainly in Washington but with satellite outposts in universities, and by attracting ambitious young people who share their views. Some have edited conservative student newspapers or studied with politically engaged Strausians; others joined the conservative Federalist Society in law school. All hope to make the “long march through the institutions.” Their intellectual life, such as it is, is conceived wholly as the making of strategies for retaking cultural and political territory. That is obviously easier when Republicans are in the ascendency, but they are not dependent on elections. There are always jobs to be found editing magazines or writing speeches or working for foundations; the neoconservative world is, paradoxically, a benevolent welfare state in which loyal citizens are always cared for.

Neoconservatism began as an intellectual movement. It is now an essential part of Republican politics, and therefore American life. But politics demands compromises and alibis. So it is not unusual in neocconservative Washington to find yourself at an event with a motley collection of people: older New York intellectuals, professors in exile from politically correct universities, economic visionaries, Teddy Roosevelt enthusiasts, home-schooling advocates, evangelical Protestants, Latin-mass Catholics, kudnits, and personalities from shock radio. Sprinkled among them you are sure to find a young Straussian foundation officer who did his doctoral dissertation on, say, Lincoln’s speeches but didn’t get tenure. Another couldn’t finish his thesis on the politics of Plato’s Timaeus and now works as a defense analyst. Both will patiently explain to you the logical connection between ancient philosophy and the latest press release from the American Enterprise Institute. It would take a comic genius, an American Aristophanes, to capture the strangeness of this little world.

Strausians have indeed become central to that world, but it is mistaken to think Straus’s ideas govern it. On the contrary, what we have witnessed over the past quarter-century is the slow adaptation of Straussian doctrine to comport with neocconservative Republicanism. A small monument to that endeavor is Carles Lord’s recent book on political leadership, The Modern Prince. Lord is a Straussian who began his career translating and writing about Aristotle, and his work in classics is widely respected. He then served on Ronald Reagan’s National Security Council before becoming an adviser to Vice President Dan Quayle, and he is now professor of strategy at the Naval War College—an unusual parcellon in any liberal democracy but not our own.

Lord clearly enjoys politics and administration, and knows much about them. His vocabulary may be abstractly Straussian—there is much talk of “legacies,” “founders,” “prudence,” “honor,” and “statesmanship”—but most of his concerns are quite concrete: the decline of parties, the shift of legislative initiative to bureaucrats and the courts, the challenge of managing intelligence. He is often wise and occasionally unpredictable when discussing the difficulty of leading complex modern democracies. But Lord is also worried and angry, and wants his readers

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I helped to edit one of those magazines, The Public Interest, in the early 1980s.
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1. In a previous article I discussed a number of new European studies of the thought of Leo Strauss, the German-Jewish thinker who spent the second half of his life teaching and writing in the United States.1 Those studies reveal a very “European” Strauss, concerned with Zionism and the Jewish question, the legitimacy of the modern Enlightenment, the rival claims of philosophy and revelation, and most fundamentally the possibility of restoring the Socratic practice of philosophy as a way of life. This Strauss is very little known or understood among the wider public. Instead, his name has been associated in recent decades almost exclusively with the activities of his American disciples, many of whom are deeply involved with Republican and neoconservative politics. This has led to wild speculation about Straussian influence in American government, even the suggestion that Strauss’s “esoteric” method of reading texts might lie behind a duplicitous foreign policy, especially in the recent Iraq war.

Most of these charges are patently absurd. What is not absurd, and deserved reflection, is the genuine connection that seems to exist in the United States between Strauss’s self-proclaimed disciples and a highly partisan faction in American public life. If the European interpreters of Strauss’s thought are to be believed, he taught that there was a fundamental tension between the life of philosophy and that of the city, and while philosophers might have to behave responsibly in light of that tension, ideological partnership was a temptation to be avoided.

This is not the way many of Strauss’s American followers see the matter today, as we see if we examine the essays collected a few years ago in Leo Strauss, the Strauscians, and the American Regime. In that book, Mark Blitz, a former associate director of the United States Information Agency during the Reagan years who now teaches at Claremont McKenna College, a Straussian stronghold, tries to isolate “the elements in Strauss that prepared and allowed an affinity with conservatives.” He finds the following:

anti-communism (and not amelioration), the virtue of individual responsibility (and not excessive social welfare), individual rights (and not affirmative action or feminism), market competition (and not excessive regulation or quasi-oligarchy), and educational and artistic excellence (and not “politicization” or self-indulgence).

While it is true that Strauss was opposed to communism, spoke of virtue, and was concerned with educational excellence, there is not a word in his works about such topics as welfare, affirmative action, feminism, and the like. Not a word, as Blitz himself admits. Why, then, do so many of his disciples act as if the political implications of his thought point them in one partisan direction? Why is it that his European readers, who study his books but have no connection with the pedagogical tradition Strauss began in America, find no such partisan drift? And who is right? To answer these questions we need to take a closer look at Leo Strauss in America.

Strauss arrived in the United States in the middle of his life, at the age of thirty-eight. He had spent most of the 1920s as an itinerant German scholar, working and teaching at various Jewish research centers while writing books on Spinoza and Maimonides. His circumstances finally changed in 1932 when he received a Rockefeller grant to do research in Paris, where he remained until 1934, and then in England, where he lived until 1937. In view of what was unfolding in Germany, the grant may have saved his life. Strauss published a much-admired book on Hobbes while in England, a country he loved, and, to judge by his correspondence, where he would have preferred to remain. But he had no academic prospects there, or in Palestine, where his friend Gershon Scholem failed to secure him a position. In the end, Strauss looked to America, a country he had expressed no interest in until then. After spending a short time as a research fellow at Columbia University he obtained his first fixed teaching post at the New School for Social Research in 1938, where he spent ten obscure but intellectually productive years. In 1949 Strauss left the New School for the University of Chicago, where he would remain for the next two decades building the devoted student following that became “the Strauscians.”

Strauss came to Chicago at a unique moment in the history of American higher education. The Second World War had just ended, Nazism had been defeated, and the cold war with Soviet communism had begun. The universities were expanding, both in size and in reach, by admitting people who had previously been excluded. In such a context one can imagine students’ excitement when a short, unassuming foreigner with a high-pitched voice entered the classroom and began analyzing the great books, line by line, claiming that they treated the most urgent existential and political questions—and that they might contain the truth.

The effect would have been intensified for Jewish-American students, who, at a time when cultural assimilation still seemed the wisest course, found themselves before a teacher who treated Judaism and the philosophical tradition with equal seriousness and dignity. Strauss’s method was famous for its simplicity and directness. (We know this from tapes and transcripts of his later courses, which circulate among his disciples.) A student would be asked to read a passage from the work in question; Strauss would make a comment or two, noting contradictions or discrepancies with earlier passages; a student might then raise a question, which would lead Strauss to digress, taking it to a much higher level and illustrating it with often earthy examples. (He was particularly fond of examples from Ann Landers’s column.) Then on to the next passage. And that was all. No attempt was made to force the work into an arbitrary historical context: nor were there appeals to disembodied streams of thought. The only relevant questions were: What did Aristotle, or Locke, or Nietzsche mean in this work? And, on a generous reading, could he possibly be right?

Recapturing naïveté is an old Romantic trope, as Strauss knew perfectly well. But it also became relevant to the kind of open Socratic questioning he held out as a philosophical ideal in his Weimar years.

As a response to the “low dishonest atmosphere” of his day and the monstrous total war in Europe and Asia, one understands its appeal. The problem proved to be that Strauss was teaching young Americans, for whom these developments were remote. Discovering Strauss, they were less like prodigals returning home from dissipations than young provincials just discovering the world beyond the city’s walls. Had Strauss returned to continental Europe to teach after the war, his students already would have studied the history of philosophy, however superficially. In his school, that might have made them more difficult to reach, plunging them deeper into what he called the “second cave” of historicism and relativism. But in turn they probably would have been more inclined—as are the authors of the new European studies of Strauss—to see him as a thinker exploring the philosophical tradition for his own purposes. His American followers have had difficulty seeing him in that light,
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as an original thinker whose example might help them down their own paths. They treat him less like Socrates than like Moses.

2.

Strauss’s seminars were almost always devoted to single philosophical works, not large swaths of intellectual history. But shortly after arriving at Chicago he was asked to deliver the prestigiousWalgreen Lectures, which were finally published in 1953 as Natural Right and History. This work, his most influential, must be considered the founding document of the Straussian school. It was, so to speak, Strauss’s application for citizenship and his way of accepting his academic chair in political science.

In it he developed a number of original theses about the history of political philosophy, all directed against standard Whiggish accounts that described a steady rise from classical, to medieval Christian, to early-modern authoritarian, to late-modern democratic and socialist thought. Strauss claimed that, properly viewed, there was a coherent tradition of “classical natural right,” running from Socrates to Thomas Aquinas, who shared more than one might think. The assumption of this classical tradition, ancient and medieval, was that there is a distinction between nature and convention, and that justice is what accords with the former, not the latter.

Whether the rules of nature are discovered through philosophy or revelation, whether one account of nature is more persuasive than another, all this is important, according to Strauss, than the conviction that natural justice as the highest human possibility is indeed the standard, and that without it we cannot understand or criticize the conventional arrangements in which we find ourselves. What Machiavelli represented, in Strauss’s view, was a great rebellion against this standard, not only against Christianity but against the tradition of classical natural right as a whole. Once that break was made it was only a matter of time, Strauss argued, before modern thought—after making intermediate stops at Locke’s liberalism and Rousseau’s Romanticism—descended into historicism and nihilism.

Natural Right and History, a dense and brilliant argument, is put forward with unusual panache yet without sacrificing Strauss’s characteristic directness and irony. Although it treats the history of philosophy, it does so in a way that forces the reader to think hard about fundamental questions. Whether it convinces is another matter. Critics have charged Strauss with ignoring the very different contexts in which his authors wrote, with under-appreciating, if not ignoring, Christianity’s break with the classical past and the Christian roots of early-modern discussions of human rights and limited government, and with many other errors. And even Strauss’s students admit that his treatment of natural right might be difficult to square with his own treatment of Socratic philosophy, which he depicts as suspending all simple appeals to nature.

But the real problems with Natural Right and History are not historical, they are pedagogical. Its effects on Strauss’s American disciples have been stultifying. In a little more than three hundred pages, the book offers students unfamiliar with any other account of philosophy’s history an epic, just-so version of it, tracing our intellectual decline from the golden age of Athens to the modern age of iron. It is a script. But unlike the script one might be taught in a European high school, along with others, this script gave the United States an important place in the unfolding of a single story. Strauss turned the book with the words of the Declaration of Independence, “we hold these truths to be self-evident,” and then asked: Do we still? Does the contemporary West still believe in natural rights? If we do believe in natural rights, we may be more like Strauss and dryly put it, that “all men are endowed by the evolutionary process or by a mysterious fate with many kinds or urges of aspirations, but certainly with no natural right.” If the latter, doesn’t that mean that modern liberalism has declined into relativism, and isn’t that indistinguishable from the kind of nihilism that gave rise to the political disasters of the twentieth century? “The contemporary rejection of natural right leads to nihilism,” Strauss writes, “nay, it is identical with nihilism.” As a rhetorical device for piquing interest in the apparently anti-quantarian task of recovering classical philosophy, this introduction succeeds brilliantly. But it also raises the peculiar thought that such an argument is wrapped up with American destiny.

Strauss never wrote a single essay about American thought and only a few shorter pieces on “the crisis of our time,” forgettable exercises in Weimar Kulturpessimismus that display little feel for American life. After Natural Right and History he spent most of his time at Chicago teaching courses on important European figures in the history of philosophy, concentrating mainly on their political works. Some of his students, though perhaps inspired by that book, turned to American political thought in earnest, and their influence subsequently became large. For the first ten to twelve years of his teaching career, Straussism remained a narrow academic phenomenon. During the first two decades of his Chicago period, Strauss’s American students were mainly interested in studying old books, in reviving la querelle des anciens et modernes, and adapting an aristocratic understanding of the philosophical life to the slightly vulgar American democratic setting. That had little to do with Socrates but it was roughly consistent with Strauss’s own scholarly activity, the main difference being the missionary zeal and rhetoric of moral uplift that sometimes suffused their writings. There were odd examples of Strauss’s students getting involved with contemporary politics (one wrote a book for Barry Goldwater) and it is true that conservatives were drawn to him because of his skepticism toward modern ideas of progress and his hostility to communism. But so were cold war liberals who shared his admiration for Lincoln and wanted to have a clear understanding of liberal democracy’s weaknesses in order to protect it. Most were
probably Democrats in those years and supported the civil rights movement, but the school remained scholarly, not partisan.

After 1968, all that changed. The universities imploded, and Straussianism took a new turn. It is difficult for those of us on the outside to understand the other side of that cultural chasm to imagine the trauma experienced by some of those teachers wedded to the pre-1968 American university, however sympathetic to their loss. Their sense of betrayal is infinite; they cannot and will not be consoled. Straussianism in the universities took the student revolts, and all that followed in American society, particularly the notion that they had learned to see genuine education as a necessarily elite enterprise, one difficult to maintain in a leveling, democratic society. But thanks to Natural Right and History, they were also prepared to see the threat of "nihilism" lurking in the interstices of modern life, waiting to be released, turning America into Weimar.

This was the backdrop underlying Allan Bloom’s The Closing of the American Mind, and helps to explain why its genuine insights about America’s youth culture buthto a hystericodoysing. Bloom and several other influential Straussians spent the Sixties at Cornell, which had a particularly ugly experience with student violence, race-baiting liberal professors, and a theater of the absurd in the face of attacks on the university. Buildings were seized, faculty were threatened, the university’s president assaulted. That moment seems to have been a revelation for the whole generation, eying his eyes to the fact that “whether it be Nuremberg or Woodstock, the principle is the same” and that “Enlightenment in America came close to breathing its last during the sixties.

In the wake of the Sixties, and after Strauss’s death in 1973, one began to see a new, more political categitology developing among some of the Straussians. Some Straussian remained non-partisan and to this day devote themselves to teaching old books for their own sake; others, traumatized by the changes in American universities and society, began gravitating toward the circles of neoconservatives then forming in New York and Washington. The culmination of these political inquiries that Straussian began to teach their students is nowhere recorded, and not because there is a secret doctrine being passed around by esoteric means. Rather, the categitology so permeating the way they think about Strauss today, and therefore about themselves, that its philosophical and political tenets need not be elaborated.1 Thus the association of the Straussians with the assumption that the modern liberal West is in crisis, unable to defend itself intellectually against internal and external enemies, who are abetted by historical relativism. This crisis obliges us to understand how modern thought reached such an impasse, which takes us back to the break with classical thought. There we discover the prudently charred character of the classical philosophy, which trained its adepts directly, and statesmen indirectly, to solve the fundamental prob-

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The best distillation of it can be found in the essays on Strauss by Nathan Tarcov and Thomas L. Pangle, which serves as an epilogue to History of Political Philosophy (University of Chicago Press, third edition, 1987), the reader first compiled by Strauss and Joseph Cropsey in the Sixties and still in print.

1 Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime, p. 71.
by a neconservative establishment eager for recruits.

American neoconservatism exists in a belated within the Washington Beltway. It is a world unto itself, intellectually and socially, sustained from foundations, think tanks, advocacy groups, magazines, and consulting firms, not to mention people in government who work as advisers, speechwriters, and mid-level bureaucrats. A number of books have been written about the movement, none of which quite captures its metamorphosis from a loosely connected network of professors and magazine editors into a well-integrated force shaping American public policy.

The neoconservative impulse was originally a moderating one, arising from a sense that American liberalism needed a reality check. Great Society programs, it was said, were exacerbating problems they were meant to solve, such as poverty and urban blight; rising taxes were stifling economic prosperity; middle-class values were being vilified, driving voters to the right; the “Vietnam syndrome” was paralyzing American foreign policy. Over the past two decades these criticisms have become commonplaces in American politics; with the election of Bill Clinton it appeared that we were (nearly) all neoconservatives now. Except for the neoconservatives themselves, who in the interim abandoned the moderate liberalism they once championed, for a coarse provincial ideology giving them enormous influence in Washington.

Neoconservatives used to give two cheers for capitalism; now four or five seem hardly sufficient. They once promoted a hard realism in foreign policy, to counteract the pacifist idealism they saw among Democrats in the Seventies; now they flirt with an eschatological faith in America’s mission civilisatrice, to be fulfilled by military means. They once offered a complex view of bourgeois culture in its relation to economic and political life; now they are in the grip of an apocalyptic vision of post-Sixties America that prevents them from contributing anything constructive to our culture. How these eschatological and apocalyptic ideas about America can exist in the same breast, without some effort at reconciliation, remains a mystery to every outsider who glances at a neoconservative magazine today. 7 They appeal, though, to political Straussian, whose hearts beat arhythmically to both Thoreau and Wagner.

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men with rounded shoulders" and "lurker, softer men, with soft white hands that never held a gun or changed a tire," delivering speeches on manliness when she was a student. But it also drives her to repeat slanderous rumors and academic urban legends about certain Straussians, as a way of scoring political points. One’s confidence in her own political judgment is not enhanced by her rosy assessment of the academic benefits that the idea of Cornell students allegedly brought to the university in the Sixties, nor by her likening Theodore Roosevelt to Osama bin Laden as a proponent of misbegotten jihad. In the end, Norton cannot decide whether Strauss was responsible for the neoconservative turn of his school or not, perhaps because he is not entirely sure what neoconservatism is. But whatever it is, she’s against it. That will make her book popular at the faculty club, just as Lord’s will be welcomed within the Beltway, but not beyond it.

To turn from Carnes Lord and Anne Norton back to the new European works on Leo Strauss is to breathe an altogether different air. Those studies of his thought remain as he attracted devoted students and readers in the first place, and help us to measure the distance we have traveled since his death thirty-two years ago. The ironies in this short chapter of American intellectual history are almost too many to number. Where but in America could a European thinker combined with the elite mantle of genuine education find some of his pupils making common cause with populist politicians? Where but in America could a teacher of esotericism, concerned about protecting philosophical inquiry from political harm, find his views caricatured in the newspapers and weeklies? And where but in America could a philosopher be made an excommunicate by a college of Socrates, who taught his students as “the young puppies of his race,” expect to see his students’ students become guardians of an ephemeral ideology?

It is a shame that Strauss’ rich intellectual legacy is being squandered through the short-sightedness, provincialism, and ambition of some of his self-proclaimed disciples. But America is not alone in this. The collapse of colonialism, the spread of democracy, the movement from cold war to post-cold war, and the extension of the state’s reach into virtually every aspect of our lives have all contributed to the decline of the intellectual and political project of the intellectual and political elite. But America is not alone in this. The collapse of colonialism, the spread of democracy, the movement from cold war to post-cold war, and the extension of the state’s reach into virtually every aspect of our lives have all contributed to the decline of the intellectual and political project of the intellectual and political elite.