

Noble lies and perpetual war: Leo Strauss, the neo-cons, and Iraq

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Are the ideas of the conservative political philosopher Leo Strauss a shaping influence on the Bush administration's world outlook? Danny Postel interviews Shadia Drury – a leading scholarly critic of Strauss – and asks her about the connection between Plato's dialogues, secrets and lies, and the United States-led war in Iraq.

What was initially an anti-war argument is now a matter of public record. It is widely recognised that the Bush administration was not honest about the reasons it gave for invading Iraq. Paul Wolfowitz, the influential United States deputy secretary of defense, has acknowledged that the evidence used to justify the war was “murky” and now says that weapons of mass destruction weren't the crucial issue anyway (see the book by Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber, *Weapons of Mass Deception: the uses of propaganda in Bush's war on Iraq* (2003).)

By contrast, [Shadia Drury](#), professor of political theory at the University of Regina in Saskatchewan, argues that the use of deception and manipulation in current US policy flow directly from the doctrines of the political philosopher Leo Strauss (1899-1973). His disciples include [Paul Wolfowitz](#) and other neo-conservatives who have driven much of the political agenda of the Bush administration.

If Shadia Drury is right, then American policy-makers exercise deception with greater coherence than their British allies in Tony Blair's 10 Downing Street. In the UK, a [public inquiry](#) is currently underway into the death of the biological weapons expert David Kelly. A central theme is also whether the government deceived the public, as a BBC reporter suggested. The inquiry has documented at least some of the ways the prime minister's entourage 'sexed up' the presentation of intelligence on the Iraqi threat. But few doubt that in terms of their philosophy, if they have one, members of Blair's staff believe they must be trusted as honest. Any apparent deceptions they may be involved in are for them matters of presentation or 'spin': attempts to project an honest gloss when surrounded by a dishonest media.

The deep influence of Leo Strauss's ideas on the current architects of US foreign policy has been referred to, if sporadically, in the press (hence an insider witticism about the influence of “Leo-cons”). Christopher Hitchens, an ardent advocate of the war, wrote unashamedly in November 2002 (in an article felicitously titled [Machiavelli in Mesopotamia](#)) that: “[p]art of the charm of the regime-change argument (from the point of view of its supporters) is that it depends on premises and objectives that cannot, at least by the administration, be publicly avowed. Since Paul Wolfowitz is from the intellectual school of Leo Strauss – and appears in fictional guise as such in Saul Bellow's novel *Ravelstein* – one may even suppose that he enjoys this arcane and occluded aspect of the debate.”

Perhaps no scholar has done as much to illuminate the Strauss phenomenon as Shadia Drury. For fifteen years she has been shining a heat lamp on the Straussians with such books as *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (1988) and *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (1997). She is also the author of *Alexandre Kojève: the Roots of Postmodern Politics* (1994) and *Terror and Civilization* (forthcoming).

She argues that the central claims of Straussian thought wield a crucial influence on men of power in the contemporary United States. She elaborates her argument in this interview.

A natural order of inequality

Danny Postel: You've argued that there is an important connection between the teachings of Leo Strauss and the Bush administration's selling of the Iraq war. What is that connection?

Shadia Drury: Leo Strauss was a great believer in the efficacy and usefulness of lies in politics. Public support for the Iraq war rested on lies about Iraq posing an imminent threat to the United States – the business about weapons of mass destruction and a fictitious alliance between al-Qaida and the Iraqi regime. Now that the lies have been exposed, Paul Wolfowitz and others in the war party are denying that these were the real reasons for the war.

So what *were* the real reasons? Reorganising the balance of power in the Middle East in favour of Israel? Expanding American hegemony in the Arab world? Possibly. But these reasons would not have been sufficient in themselves to mobilise American support for the war. And the Straussian cabal in the administration realised that.

Danny Postel: The neo-conservative vision is commonly taken to be about spreading democracy and liberal values globally. And when Strauss is mentioned in the press, he is typically described as a great defender of liberal democracy against totalitarian tyranny. You've written, however, that Strauss had a "profound antipathy to both liberalism and democracy."

Shadia Drury: The idea that Strauss was a great defender of liberal democracy is laughable. I suppose that Strauss's disciples consider it a noble lie. Yet many in the media have been gullible enough to believe it.

How could an admirer of Plato and Nietzsche be a liberal democrat? The ancient philosophers whom Strauss most cherished believed that the unwashed masses were not fit for either truth or liberty, and that giving them these sublime treasures would be like throwing pearls before swine. In contrast to modern political thinkers, the ancients denied that there is any natural right to liberty. Human beings are born neither free nor equal. The natural human condition, they held, is not one of freedom, but of subordination – and in Strauss's estimation they were right in thinking so.

Praising the wisdom of the ancients and condemning the folly of the moderns was the whole point of Strauss's most famous book, *Natural Right and History*. The cover of the book sports the American Declaration of Independence. But the book is a celebration of nature – not the natural rights of man (as the appearance of the book would lead one to believe) but the natural order of domination and subordination.

The necessity of lies

Danny Postel: What is the relevance of Strauss's interpretation of Plato's notion of the noble lie?

Shadia Drury: Strauss rarely spoke in his own name. He wrote as a commentator on the classical texts of political theory. But he was an extremely opinionated and dualistic commentator. The fundamental distinction that pervades and informs all of his work is that between the ancients and the [moderns](#). Strauss divided the history of political thought into two camps: the ancients (like Plato) are wise and wily, whereas the moderns (like Locke and other liberals) are vulgar and foolish. Now, it seems to me eminently fair and reasonable to attribute to Strauss the ideas he attributes to his beloved ancients.

In Plato's dialogues, everyone assumes that Socrates is Plato's mouthpiece. But Strauss argues in his book [The City and Man](#) (pp. 74-5, 77, 83-4, 97, 100, 111) that [Thrasymachus](#) is Plato's real mouthpiece (on this point, see also M.F. Burnyeat, "Sphinx without a Secret", *New York Review of Books*, [30 May 1985](#) [paid-for only]). So, we must surmise that Strauss shares the insights of the wise Plato (alias Thrasymachus) that justice is merely the interest of the stronger; that those in power make the rules in their own interests and call it justice.

Leo Strauss repeatedly defends the political realism of Thrasymachus and [Machiavelli](#) (see, for example, his *Natural Right and History*, p. 106). This view of the world is clearly manifest in the foreign policy of the current administration in the United States.

A second fundamental belief of Strauss's ancients has to do with their insistence on the need for secrecy and the necessity of lies. In his book *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Strauss outlines why secrecy is necessary. He argues that the wise must conceal their views for two reasons – to spare the people's feelings and to protect the elite from possible reprisals. The people will not be happy to learn that there is only one natural right – the right of the superior to rule over the inferior, the master over the slave, the husband over the wife, and the wise few over the vulgar many. In *On Tyranny*, Strauss refers to this natural right as the "tyrannical teaching" of his beloved ancients. It is tyrannical in the classic sense of rule above rule or in the absence of law (p. 70).

Now, the ancients were determined to keep this tyrannical teaching secret because the people are not likely to tolerate the fact that they are intended for subordination; indeed, they may very well turn their resentment against the superior few. Lies are thus necessary to protect the superior few from the persecution of the vulgar many.

The effect of Strauss's teaching is to convince his acolytes that they are the natural ruling elite and the persecuted few. And it does not take much intelligence for them to surmise that they are in a situation of great danger, especially in a world devoted to the modern ideas of equal rights and freedoms. Now more than ever, the wise few must proceed cautiously and with circumspection. So, they come to the conclusion that they have a moral justification to lie in order to avoid persecution. Strauss goes so far as to say that dissembling and deception – in effect, a culture of lies – is the peculiar justice of the wise.

Strauss justifies his position by an appeal to Plato's concept of the noble lie. But in truth, Strauss has a very impoverished conception of Plato's noble lie. Plato thought that the noble lie is a story whose details are fictitious; but at the heart of it is a profound truth. In the myth of metals, for example, some people have golden souls – meaning that they are more capable of resisting the temptations of power. And these morally trustworthy types are the ones

who are most fit to rule. The details are fictitious, but the moral of the story is that not all human beings are morally equal.

In contrast to this reading of [Plato](#), Strauss thinks that the superiority of the ruling philosophers is an *intellectual* superiority and not a *moral* one (*Natural Right and History*, p. 151). For many commentators who (like Karl Popper) have read Plato as a totalitarian, the logical consequence is to doubt that philosophers can be trusted with political power. Those who read him this way invariably reject him. Strauss is the only interpreter who gives a sinister reading to Plato, and then celebrates him.

The dialectic of fear and tyranny

Danny Postel: In the Straussian scheme of things, there are the wise few and the vulgar many. But there is also a third group – the gentlemen. Would you explain how they figure?

Shadia Drury: There are indeed three types of men: the wise, the gentlemen, and the vulgar. The wise are the lovers of the harsh, unadulterated truth. They are capable of looking into the abyss without fear and trembling. They recognise neither God nor moral imperatives. They are devoted above all else to their own pursuit of the “higher” pleasures, which amount to consorting with their “puppies” or young initiates.

The second type, the gentlemen, are lovers of honour and glory. They are the most ingratiating towards the conventions of their society – that is, the illusions of the cave. They are true believers in God, honour, and moral imperatives. They are ready and willing to embark on acts of great courage and self-sacrifice at a moment’s notice.

The third type, the vulgar many, are lovers of wealth and pleasure. They are selfish, slothful, and indolent. They can be inspired to rise above their brutish existence only by fear of impending death or catastrophe.

Like Plato, Strauss believed that the supreme political ideal is the rule of the wise. But the rule of the wise is unattainable in the real world. Now, according to the conventional wisdom, Plato realised this, and settled for the rule of law. But Strauss did not endorse this solution entirely. Nor did he think that it was Plato’s *real* solution – Strauss pointed to the “nocturnal council” in Plato’s *Laws* to illustrate his point.

The real Platonic solution as understood by Strauss is the *covert rule of the wise* (see Strauss’s – [The Argument and the Action of Plato’s Laws](#)). This covert rule is facilitated by the overwhelming stupidity of the gentlemen. The more gullible and unperceptive they are, the easier it is for the wise to control and manipulate them. Supposedly, Xenophon makes that clear to us.

For Strauss, the rule of the wise is not about classic conservative values like order, stability, justice, or respect for authority. The rule of the wise is intended as an antidote to modernity. Modernity is the age in which the vulgar many have triumphed. It is the age in which they have come closest to having exactly what their hearts desire – wealth, pleasure, and endless entertainment. But in getting just what they desire, they have unwittingly been reduced to beasts. Nowhere is this state of affairs more advanced than in America. And the global reach of American culture threatens to trivialise life and turn it into entertainment. This was as terrifying a spectre for Strauss as it was for Alexandre Kojève and [Carl Schmitt](#).

This is made clear in Strauss’s exchange with Kojève (reprinted in Strauss’s *On Tyranny*), and in his commentary on Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political* (reprinted in Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*). [Kojève](#) lamented the

animalisation of man and Schmitt worried about the trivialisation of life. All three of them were convinced that liberal economics would turn life into entertainment and destroy politics; all three understood politics as a conflict between mutually hostile groups willing to fight each other to the death. In short, they all thought that man's humanity depended on his willingness to rush naked into battle and headlong to his death. Only perpetual war can overturn the modern project, with its emphasis on self-preservation and "creature comforts." Life can be politicised once more, and man's humanity can be restored.

This terrifying vision fits perfectly well with the desire for honour and glory that the neo-conservative gentlemen covet. It also fits very well with the religious sensibilities of gentlemen. The combination of religion and nationalism is the elixir that Strauss advocates as the way to turn natural, relaxed, hedonistic men into devout nationalists willing to fight and die for their God and country.

I never imagined when I wrote my first book on Strauss that the unscrupulous elite that he elevates would ever come so close to political power, nor that the ominous tyranny of the wise would ever come so close to being realised in the political life of a great nation like the United States. But fear is the greatest ally of tyranny.

Danny Postel: You've described Strauss as a nihilist.

Shadia Drury: Strauss is a nihilist in the sense that he believes that there is no rational foundation for morality. He is an atheist, and he believes that in the absence of God, morality has no grounding. It's all about benefiting others and oneself; there is no objective reason for doing so, only rewards and punishments in this life.

But Strauss is not a nihilist if we mean by the term a denial that there is any truth, a belief that everything is interpretation. He does not deny that there is an independent reality. On the contrary, he thinks that independent reality consists in nature and its "order of rank" – the high and the low, the superior and the inferior. Like Nietzsche, he believes that the history of western civilisation has led to the triumph of the inferior, the rabble – something they both lamented profoundly.

Danny Postel: This connection is curious, since Strauss is bedevilled by Nietzsche; and one of Strauss's most famous students, [Allan Bloom](#), fulminates profusely in his book *The Closing of the American Mind* against the influence of Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger.

Shadia Drury: Strauss's criticism of the existentialists, especially Heidegger, is that they tried to elicit an ethic out of the abyss. This was the ethic of resoluteness – choose whatever you like and be loyal to it to the death; its content does not matter. But Strauss's reaction to moral nihilism was different. Nihilistic philosophers, he believes, should reinvent the Judæo-Christian God, but live like pagan gods themselves – taking pleasure in the games they play with each other as well as the games they play on ordinary mortals.

The question of nihilism is complicated, but there is no doubt that Strauss's reading of Plato entails that the philosophers should return to the cave and manipulate the images (in the form of media, magazines, newspapers). They know full well that the line they espouse is mendacious, but they are convinced that theirs are noble lies.

The intoxication of perpetual war

Danny Postel: You characterise the outlook of the Bush administration as a kind of realism, in the spirit of Thrasymachus and Machiavelli. But isn't the real divide within the administration (and on the American right more generally) more complex: between foreign policy realists, who

are pragmatists, and neo-conservatives, who see themselves as idealists – even moralists – on a mission to topple tyrants, and therefore in a struggle *against* realism?

Shadia Drury: I think that the neo-conservatives are for the most part genuine in wanting to spread the American commercial model of liberal democracy around the globe. They are convinced that it is the best thing, not just for America, but for the world. Naturally, there is a tension between these “idealists” and the more hard-headed realists within the administration. I contend that the tensions and conflicts within the current administration reflect the differences between the surface teaching, which is appropriate for gentlemen, and the ‘nocturnal’ or covert teaching, which the philosophers alone are privy to. It is very unlikely for an ideology inspired by a secret teaching to be entirely coherent.

The issue of nationalism is an example of this. The philosophers, wanting to secure the nation against its external enemies as well as its internal decadence, sloth, pleasure, and consumption, encourage a strong patriotic fervour among the honour-loving gentlemen who wield the reins of power. That strong nationalistic spirit consists in the belief that their nation and its values are the best in the world, and that all other cultures and their values are inferior in comparison.

[Irving Kristol](#), the father of neo-conservatism and a Strauss disciple, denounced nationalism in a 1973 essay; but in another essay written in 1983, he declared that the foreign policy of neo-conservatism must reflect its nationalist proclivities. A decade on, in a 1993 essay, he claimed that “religion, nationalism, and economic growth are the pillars of neoconservatism.” (See “The Coming ‘Conservative Century’”, in *Neoconservatism: the autobiography of an idea*, p. 365.) .

In *Reflections of a Neoconservative* (p. xiii), Kristol wrote that: “patriotism springs from love of the nation’s past; nationalism arises out of hope for the nation’s future, distinctive greatness.... Neoconservatives believe... that the goals of American foreign policy must go well beyond a narrow, too literal definition of ‘national security’. It is the national interest of a world power, as this is defined by a sense of national destiny ... not a myopic national security”.

The same sentiment was echoed by the doyen of contemporary [Straussianism](#), Harry Jaffa, when he said that America is the “Zion that will light up all the world.” It is easy to see how this sort of thinking can get out of hand, and why hard-headed realists tend to find it naïve if not dangerous.

But Strauss’s worries about America’s global aspirations are entirely different. Like Heidegger, Schmitt, and Kojève, Strauss would be more concerned that America would succeed in this enterprise than that it would fail. In that case, the “last man” would extinguish all hope for humanity (Nietzsche); the “night of the world” would be at hand (Heidegger); the animalisation of man would be complete (Kojève); and the trivialisation of life would be accomplished (Schmitt). That is what the success of America’s global aspirations meant to them.

Francis Fukuyama’s [The End of History and the Last Man](#) is a popularisation of this viewpoint. It sees the coming catastrophe of American global power as inevitable, and seeks to make the best of a bad situation. It is far from a celebration of American dominance.

On this perverse view of the world, if America fails to achieve her “national destiny”, and is mired in perpetual war, then all is well. Man’s humanity, defined in terms of struggle to the death, is rescued from extinction. But men like Heidegger, Schmitt, Kojève, and Strauss expect the worst. They expect that the universal spread of the spirit of commerce would soften manners

and emasculate man. To my mind, this fascistic glorification of death and violence springs from a profound inability to celebrate life, joy, and the sheer thrill of existence.

To be clear, Strauss was not as hostile to democracy as he was to [liberalism](#). This is because he recognises that the vulgar masses have numbers on their side, and the sheer power of numbers cannot be completely ignored. Whatever can be done to bring the masses along is legitimate. If you can use democracy to turn the masses against their own liberty, this is a great triumph. It is the sort of tactic that neo-conservatives use consistently, and in some cases very successfully.

Among the Straussians

Danny Postel: Finally, I'd like to ask about your interesting reception among the Straussians. Many of them dismiss your interpretation of Strauss and denounce your work in the most adamant terms ("bizarre splenetic"). Yet one scholar, Laurence Lampert, has reprehended his fellow Straussians for this, writing in his *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* that your book *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* "contains many fine skeptical readings of Strauss's texts and acute insights into Strauss's real intentions." [Harry Jaffa](#) has even made the provocative suggestion that you might be a "closet Straussian" yourself!

Shadia Drury: I have been publicly denounced and privately adored. Following the publication of my book *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* in 1988, letters and gifts poured in from Straussian graduate students and professors all over North America – books, dissertations, tapes of Strauss's Hillel House lectures in Chicago, transcripts of every course he ever taught at the university, and even a personally crafted [Owl of Minerva](#) with a letter declaring me a goddess of wisdom! They were amazed that an outsider could have penetrated the secret teaching. They sent me unpublished material marked with clear instructions not to distribute to "suspicious persons". I received letters from graduate students in Toronto, Chicago, Duke, Boston College, Claremont, Fordham, and other Straussian centres of "learning." One of the students compared his experience in reading my work with "a person lost in the wilderness who suddenly happens on a map." Some were led to abandon their schools in favour of fresher air; but others were delighted to discover what it was they were supposed to believe in order to belong to the [charmed circle](#) of future philosophers and initiates.

After my first book on Strauss came out, some of the Straussians in Canada dubbed me the "bitch from Calgary." Of all the titles I hold, that is the one I cherish most. The hostility toward me was understandable. Nothing is more threatening to Strauss and his acolytes than the truth in general and the truth about Strauss in particular. His admirers are determined to conceal the truth about his ideas.

My intention in writing the book was to express Strauss's ideas clearly and without obfuscation so that his views could become the subject of philosophical debate and criticism, and not the stuff of feverish conviction. I wanted to smoke the Straussians out of their caves and into the philosophical light of day. But instead of engaging me in philosophical debate, they denied that Strauss stood for any of the ideas I attributed to him.

[Laurence Lampert](#) is the only Straussian to declare valiantly that it is time to stop playing games and to admit that Strauss was indeed a Nietzschean thinker – that it is time to stop the denial and start defending Strauss's ideas.

I suspect that Lampert's [honesty](#) is threatening to those among the Straussians who are interested in philosophy but who seek power. There is no doubt that open and candid debate about Strauss is likely to undermine their prospects in Washington.

Who is Leo Strauss?

Leo Strauss was born in 1899 in the region of Hessen, Germany, the son of a Jewish small businessman. He went to secondary school in Marburg and served as an interpreter in the German army in the first world war. He was awarded a doctorate at Hamburg University in 1921 for a thesis on philosophy that was supervised by Ernst Cassirer.

Strauss's post-doctoral work involved study of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, and in 1930 he published his first book, on Spinoza's critique of religion; his second, on the 12th century Jewish philosopher Maimonides, was published in 1935. After a research period in London, he published *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* in 1936.

In 1937, he moved to Columbia University, and from 1938 to 1948 taught political science and philosophy at the New School for Social Research, New York. During this period he wrote *On Tyranny* (1948) and *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952).

In 1949, he became professor of political philosophy at the University of Chicago, and remained there for twenty years. His works of this period include *Natural Right and History* (1953), *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958), *What is Political Philosophy?* (1959), *The City and Man* (1964), *Socrates and Aristophanes* (1966), and *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (1968). Between 1968 and 1973, Strauss taught in colleges in California and Maryland, and completed work on Xenophon's Socratic discourses and *Argument and Action of Plato's Laws* (1975). After his death in October 1973, the essay collection *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (1983) was published.