

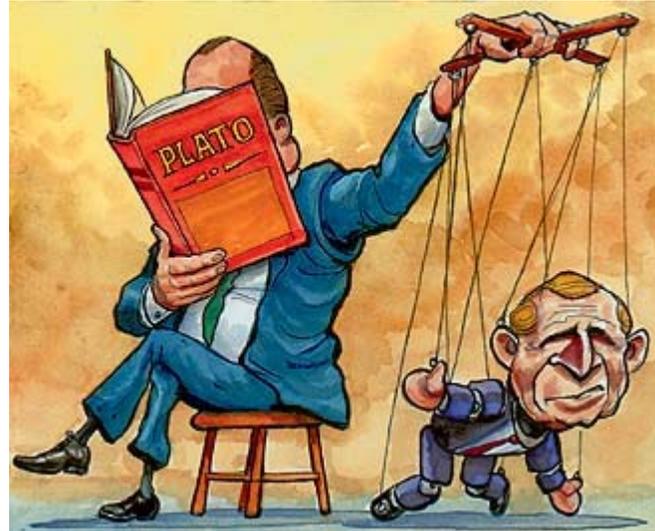
# Philosophers and kings

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## A strange waltz involving George Bush, ancient Greece and a dead German thinker

FROM the moment George Bush moved into the White House, the search has been on for the man (or woman) who is pulling his strings. Is the puppeteer Dick Cheney or Donald Rumsfeld? Karl Rove or Condoleezza Rice? Big Oil or old-time religion? Each has had their spell in the spotlight. But now all are forgotten in the fuss about the most surprising suspect of all: Leo Strauss, a political philosopher who died in 1973 and wrote such page-turners as "Xenophon's Socratic Discourse".



In March the *Executive Intelligence Review*, an eccentric website run by Lyndon LaRouche, posted a profile of Strauss entitled "Fascist Godfather of the Neo-Cons". You might have thought that the article's overheated language and conspiracy-mongering would have killed the argument. But since then a flotilla of respectable publications, from the *New Yorker* to *Le Monde*, have jumped on the bandwagon. Who on earth was Leo Strauss?

The "Fascist Godfather of the Neo-Cons" was, in fact, a German Jew who fled the Holocaust to find a safe haven in the United States. He produced a series of learned studies of political theorists that are variously described as seminal and utterly opaque. But his real talent was for teaching. He taught at the University of Chicago for two decades, and produced a small army of devoted pupils who spread the word.

One reason why Strauss is in the news is because so many of his admirers are now important figures in conservative Washington. Paul Wolfowitz, the deputy secretary of defence, invariably tops the list, but other Straussians in or around the administration include Abram Shulsky, director of the Pentagon's Office of Special Plans, John Walters, the drug tsar, and Leon Kass, the head of the president's council on bioethics. Irving Kristol, one of the first neocons, has passed the creed down to his son Bill, the ubiquitous editor of the *Weekly Standard*. Every July 4th, about 60 Washington Straussians have a picnic.

The second reason why Strauss is so controversial is that a little selective quotation can be used to give his thinking a decidedly sinister tinge. Strauss emphasised both the fragility of democracy and the importance of intellectual elites. He was also a devotee of Plato, who famously argued that "philosopher kings" sometimes had to be willing to tell "noble lies" in order to keep the ignorant masses in line. The implication: Mr Wolfowitz and his fellow Straussians deliberately lied about Saddam Hussein's nukes to advance their political cause.

This is stretching it. Strauss was critical of democracy in much the same way that Winston Churchill was: he believed (unlike Plato) that it was the worst political system apart from all

the others. He focused on the weaknesses of liberal democracy—particularly its habit of underestimating the dangers of tyranny—precisely because he had seen the Weimar Republic destroyed at close hand.

As for Mr Wolfowitz, he is a clever cove, but deputy defence secretaries don't go around making the country's foreign policy—particularly when they have men like Mr Rumsfeld and Mr Cheney sitting above them. Nor is Mr Wolfowitz a pure Straussian. He may have studied with Strauss's alter ego, Allan Bloom, and even earned a walk-on part in Saul Bellow's novel, "Ravelstein", but the biggest influence on his thinking was Albert Wohlstetter, a mathematician-cum-military strategist.

So is the flap about Strauss a pointless waltz? Arguably, Mr LaRouche and the *New Yorker* have been looking in the wrong place. The true impact of all these Straussians walking the corridors of power is not really to do with telling noble fibs in diplomacy; it has to do with domestic policy.

### **Having a Platonic relationship. No, really**

The rise of the Straussians suggests that American conservatism has shifted its focus from liberty to virtue. Ronald Reagan was surrounded with free-marketers in Adam Smith ties. Newt Gingrich regarded the government as a monster that needed to be beheaded. But Mr Bush is an intensely religious man who has no qualms about using big government to improve people's behaviour. Strauss was an agnostic, but he also stressed the cultivation of personal virtue, and his followers (perhaps traducing him, and certainly outraging Plato) have argued that organised religion is a necessary buttress of civilisation.

Strauss's paternalist side would have warmed to the way that Mr Bush has expanded the Department of Education, has started promoting marriage through the Department of Health and Human Services and has toughened America's drug policies. Straussians such as Mr Walters and Mr Kass have helped to clothe Mr Bush's Christian instincts in the non-religious language of moral philosophy and practical policy.

More than anything, however, the Straussians show what a strangely intellectual place Washington is. It may be led by a man who regarded Yale as a drinking competition (which he damn-near won). But it is a place where PhDs are a dime a dozen and where people seriously debate everything from "rules and tools for running an empire" (the topic of a seminar on June 16th) to the cultural contradictions of capitalism. In what other world capital, except perhaps Paris, could 60 Plato-worshipping politicians and academics have a picnic?

The rise of the Straussians also illustrates an odd point about modern American conservatism. Despite all their bile about Old Europe, the American right has repeatedly found its inspiration in European thinkers. A few years ago, it was an Austrian libertarian called Friedrich Hayek. Now it is a German Jew who regarded ancient Greece as the fountain of all wisdom. With European constitution-makers seeking inspiration in the Philadelphia Convention, and American conservatives embracing European philosophical tracts, perhaps transatlantic relations aren't quite as bad as all that.