

# Leo Strauss and the Decline of America

By MARK WEGIERSKI

Leo Strauss (1899-1973), an intellectual exile from Nazi Germany, is best known as a long-time distinguished professor of political philosophy at the University of Chicago (1949-1969), who spread his ideas to a large number of political scientists at that university and beyond. This subsequently became the fount of a major intellectual school in America, called the Straussians. Strauss is frequently regarded today as a major conservative thinker and intellectual superstar.

Paul Edward Gottfried is a leading analyst of conservative movements in the Western world, who coined the term “paleoconservative.” For many years he was an endowed professor in the humanities at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania. All of his books have been published by academic or respectable commercial presses, including three books on the conservative movement in America (1988, 1993, and 2007). His 2007 work on what is a controversial subject is an extended critique of the shallowness and anti-intellectualism of “movement conservatism” in the U.S. Professor Gottfried has also published a number of books that provide an extended critique of “the managerial-therapeutic regime” – which he regards as a dystopia that has engulfed most of Western society. These studies include *After Liberalism: Mass Democracy in the Managerial State* (1999), and *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt: Towards a Secular Theocracy* (2003). Gottfried’s first published book was *Conservative Millenarians: The Romantic Experience in Bavaria* (1979), his expanded dissertation which gave indications of his lifelong interest in intellectual history and the search for authentic movements of the Right. His book, *The Search for Meaning: Hegel and the Postwar American Right* (1986), was glowingly reviewed in *National Review*, before that publication fell into the hands of new management.

In those days, even so-called mainstream conservatives did not shrink from what has been called “purposeful pessimism.” In 1990 came Gottfried’s incisive

study of the German legal theorist Carl Schmitt and several books later, *The Strange Death of Marxism* in 2005. In this last work Gottfried pointed to the elements of social conservatism embedded in the Old Left and argued that to the extent former communists embraced managerialist capitalism, multiculturalism, and “alternative lifestyles,” they became *less* not more “conservative.” Gottfried is also a polyglot humanist, like Strauss himself, and therefore qualified to write an insightful critique of his latest subject. He embarks on this work at least partly as a defender of an intellectual Right that the Straussians and the American conservative establishment continue to ignore.

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 By Paul Edward Gottfried  
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Gottfried begins by pointing out that Strauss’s German-Jewish origins, his exile from Nazi Germany, and his life-long ardent Zionism are central to understanding his ideas and the attraction felt for them by his disciples. After a youthful flirtation with such figures as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Carl Schmitt, Strauss powerfully recoiled from what he understood as the revolt against modernity, and this became particularly the case after the onset of the Nazi regime. Even before his exile, Strauss’s critique of certain aspects of modernity was closely related to his Jewish identity. When he finally reached America, Strauss’s hortatory efforts were directed toward making America “safe” for Jews — and preventing the emergence of radical anti-Semitic politics in America.

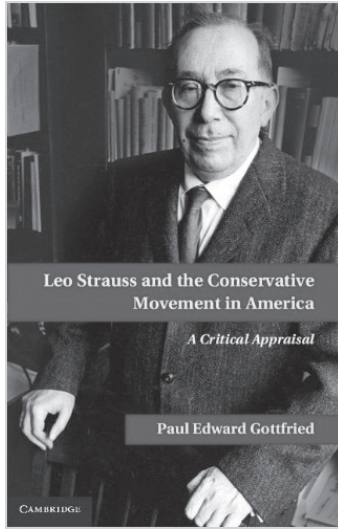
In America, Strauss became an intellectual superstar, especially because of a propitious confluence of events in the 1950s. In his attacks on relativism, historicism, and positivism, Strauss sounded profoundly conservative to American readers, and he appealed in particular to American Catholic intellectuals of the 1950s,

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who were seeking some kind of grounding for their traditional view of Natural Law. These fans were drawn to Strauss, because he talked up America, although there was much in what Strauss wrote that would indicate that he was skeptical about those very ideals his non-Jewish admirers imagined he was defending.

Gottfried maintains that Strauss and the Straussians have never been men of the Right. They were, in the American parlance, “Cold War liberals,” moderate social democrats, who opposed the Soviets and who did so partly because of the growing antagonism between the Soviet Union and Israel. Strauss elevated liberal democracy to a touchstone of political decency that was to be defended against totalitarians of every stripe. Strauss, and to an even greater extent, his acolytes, have stressed



equality as one of the central principles of liberal democracy. They rushed to support many of the legislative milestones of the 1960s, which most conservatives of that epoch viewed with suspicion. They combined an enthusiastic support for the Civil Rights revolution and welfare state measures at home with a passion for war-making abroad, aimed at protecting Israel and at remaking other countries to fit their image of America. There are obvious connections between Straussians and neo-conservatives, which Gottfried does not hesitate to discuss, even while noting the differences as well as overlaps between the two groups.

The book also pays attention to the frequent left-wing critiques against the Straussians that impugn them as a “neo-Nazi” movement. The only kernel of truth that Gottfried sees in this criticism is that the Straussians are highly political. They support their own brand of patriotism, which they deem appropriate for America as a liberal democracy. It corresponds to the neoconservative idea of “propositional nationhood,” an image of America as held together by a universal, egalitarian ideology.

Because of their appetite for military adventures, in which others are to fight and die, Straussians are frequently seen as right-wing militarists. What is underplayed here, and what Gottfried stresses, is that this militarism is driven by uniformly leftist ideals. Ironically, the isolationist Old Right in America, or what is left of it, would be more peaceful than the global democratic

Straussians who now sit at the head of “conservative” foundations and publications. Although Gottfried never says as much, we may infer it from his commentary.

A considerable portion of Gottfried’s book is devoted to a careful unpacking of the concept “political philosophy,” which was one of Strauss’s favored terms. Gottfried contends that term unduly privileges the political and even policy issues at the expense of what is truly philosophical, which is metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological, and, above all, what Socrates and Heidegger described as “concern about death.” The term “political philosophy” allows some Straussians to present their political advocacy as a lofty philosophical undertaking. Gottfried maintains that it would be best to throw away this loaded term.

His book provides a coherent answer to the question often asked about the Straussians: are they detached, abstruse scholars or clever adepts playing the political games of the academy? Gottfried’s careful explication of the term “political philosophy” shows how it can be made to serve as a conceptual bridge between traditional humanistic learning and editorializing on behalf of “democratic values.”

Gottfried also points out that while Straussians engage in debate with such left-wing critics as Shadia B. Drury, and accord them high respect, they rarely respond to criticisms from the intellectual Right or from established scholars in political theory who disagree with them. They typically treat such criticism as beneath contempt. Indeed, Gottfried’s own book has been pointedly ignored in the neoconservative-Straussian press since its publication last year.

Gottfried compares Marx and Strauss as two cultic figures who became objects of worship for their academic followers. Although Straussians may not fancy this comparison, it is not made in a mean-spirited way. There is nothing in the book that would suggest that Gottfried is hostile to either Marx or Strauss. He is simply reacting to the excesses of their followers. In the case of Strauss, he is more than generous in praising some of his early (German) work, and he treats an essay Strauss wrote on Martin Heidegger with effusive admiration. What he deplores are those aspects of Strauss’s thinking that his mainstream disciples have glorified. Gottfried also finds some good points in the Straussians that he elaborates on in the later chapters: e.g., they have stimulated interest in classical political writers; they believe in the study of political theory; and they defend political study from being reduced to a pseudo-scientific “social science.”

Gottfried does note, however, the increasing migration of Straussians from the academy into neoconservative think-tanks and foundations. He thinks his subjects are becoming less “bookish” and more “political.” Nev-

ertheless, Gottfried writes: “We are witnessing a shift in emphasis but not the abandonment of an established worldview for one that is totally different.” (p. 173). He also suggests that the Straussians may be challenged by the rise of libertarianism on the American Right, and unlike the Old Right, this opposition, particularly in the matter of foreign policy, may be harder for the Straussians and their neoconservative allies to deal with than an old right that they managed decades ago to marginalize.

On the basis of Gottfried’s book, the reviewer would like to elaborate on how the constellation of ideas around Strauss and Straussianism may have contributed to problems for America in the recent decades.

democratic essence. There are of course other readings of American developments that are more pessimistic. Some might argue that, despite the apparent and totemic fixity of its constitutional arrangements, America has been characterized by excessive flux and revolution. These revolutionary transformations frequently took the shape of the advance of a liberal vanguard — that subsequently only intensified the managerial aspects of the society. On the basis of a “progressive,” egalitarian reading of American history, it may be hard to argue against the latest incarnations of that progress, whether immigration, or feminist and gay demands for further equality.



First of all, Straussians have helped discredit notions, however residual these may have been in the American polity, that there was a historic American nation out of which American constitutional developments and history flowed.

Second, in privileging “democratic values” as the American ideal, Straussians and neoconservatives successfully urged America, supposedly from the right, to purge itself of any “illiberal” residues. One of the most salient expressions of this development was the immigration act of 1965, where America was required to open itself up to the world, as the exemplar of “global democracy.” Since America is supposedly based on an “idea” of democratic equality — this influx is not considered to be a threat to the American nation, which is purely “propositional.” Indeed, the challenge of absorbing more people by teaching them the key proposition will supposedly increase America’s strength.

Third, Straussianism has pushed a “progressive” reading of American history, i.e., that there has been a salutary “progress” toward realizing America’s liberal

Fourth, it could be argued that Straussianism has frequently had the effect of diverting conservative-tending persons (especially in the academy) into mild, conformist opposition. Straussians have contributed to a major misdefinition of “conservatism” in current-day America.

Fifth, the pushing of wars abroad and what could pointedly be called an *ersatz* patriotism (especially under George W. Bush) has probably actually led to the sapping of the last residues of publicly prominent traditionalist conservatism in America. Surrender on issues of domestic social policy and the so-called “culture war” was the price that had to be paid for bipartisan support of these foreign wars. The wars (especially in Iraq and Afghanistan) have also considerably accentuated America’s worsening debt crisis.

Gottfried’s work may be the best short study of Strauss by a non-Straussian that has appeared to date. It is a balanced examination of Strauss’s ideas, which shows their impact on the work and politics of his disciples. ■