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ABSTRACT

This article explores the explanations for Straussianism, the ‘ideology for elites’ articulated by arch-conservative political philosopher Leo Strauss. Why would ambitious American elites ever embrace an ideology whose founder is tainted by his affiliation with figures foreign and authoritarian? Although American academia is relatively tolerant of heterodox ideas, American politics is not. Yet many Straussians have been appointed to political offices responsible for public policy making. In addition to the pleasures of textual interpretation, satisfaction in belonging to an intellectual elite, and membership in an academic-bureaucratic mutual aid network, being a Straussian offers the individual intellectual license to exercise the loyalty option: fervent demonstrations of loyalty to current organisational leadership. Unlike the voice or exit options, the loyalty option offers Straussians the opportunity to rise in the leaderships of well established but declining organisations. The ability of avoid or deflect responsibility for poor performance is at a premium in such organisations.

Straussianism as political philosophy has been explained. There may be little agreement about the value of the intellectual contributions made by University of Chicago political philosopher Leo Strauss, but their content presents no more mystery for scholars than they do interest for the general public. The ‘solution’ to the problems of modernity

offered by Strauss and epigones like Allan Bloom and Walter Berns was for intellectual elites in the United States to reclaim the heritage of an essentialised West which they conceived as being embodied in the classical Western canon and then work to prevent the less responsible vulgar masses from succumbing to modernity's various *isms*: communism, anti-Semitism, secularism and scientism. For the next generation of Straussians the list of offensively modern ideological challenges to established institutions grew to include, but is not limited to, multiculturalism, feminism, and 'radical' environmentalism.

What has not been explained is the attraction of Straussianism for the extensive and influential network of intellectuals identifiable as the Straussians. That attraction is puzzling because there are other 20th century conservative political philosophers to choose from, Michael Oakeshott for example, who are less alien to the Anglo-American political tradition and untainted by any association with the ideas of the Nazi jurist and political philosopher Carl Schmitt.¹ Like Strauss, Oakeshott offers a political philosophy critical of empirical science, which would make him attractive to math-phobic students of the humanities.² This is all the more puzzling because today the most prominent Straussians serve neither as teachers of political philosophy nor in any other capacity in academia. Instead, many hold appointive positions in government, work as journalists or occupy places in the peculiar liminal world of the Washington think tank.³ While the American academy is relatively tolerant of heterodox beliefs, the world beyond its walls is often less forgiving of commitments to ideas deemed foreign and authoritarian.

Three partial solutions to the puzzle are facially plausible. The first solution is that the intricacies of textual interpretation – Straussianism is first and foremost a method of reading texts – provide scholars with pleasure in the same way that some laymen are fascinated by the intricacies of baseball statistics or bird watching. Irving Kristol, editor of influential neo-conservative organ *The Weekly Standard*, describes encountering the ideas of Leo Strauss as a conversion experience in which the student is privileged to

¹ N. Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*. (New York: Routledge, 2008).

² P. Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990)

³ G. Dorren, *Imperial Designs: Neoconservatism and the New Pax Americana* (New York: Routledge, 2004); S. M. Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004); J. Mann, *The Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Viking, 2004).

perceive the modern as the ‘ancients’ would. Along with imagining that they are capable of channeling the intellectual world of the ancient eastern Mediterranean, the student also imbibes a heavy dose of anti-empiricism.⁴ Textual interpretation and disdain for rigorous empirical analysis that shades into contempt are also features of Straussianism’s largely unacknowledged sibling intellectual movement: post-modernism. The flaw in this first solution is that there are no networks of amateur baseball statisticians, bird watchers and even post-modern deconstructionists linking government, journalism and academia.

The second solution is that some intellectuals are attracted to Straussianism because they enjoy its self-conscious and self-defined elitism, in the same way that Victorian British elites might take satisfaction in belonging to exclusive London gentlemen’s clubs like the Traveller’s Club or East India Club, or in the same way that cliques of ‘sneaker-heads’ with collections of expensive limited edition tennis shoes might take pride in their collections. Part of the satisfaction of being recognised as a Straussian by fellow Starussians is that the vulgar masses, who ought not to be exposed to philosophy in any event, cannot gain admission to the magic circle of the like minded. Like the post-modernists dominant in the English departments of American universities and colleges, the Straussians disdain communicating the core ideas of their political philosophy to the masses, not the least because the masses would find it irrelevant, annoying or distasteful. That natural science and universal education are primarily responsible for modern problems is a claim no more acceptable to the majority of Americans than the post-modern moral relativism that everything is text. Unlike the post-modernists, however, the Straussians are interested in what the masses think, or more importantly, might be persuaded to think. Philosophical understanding should not be disclosed to the masses lest it undermine the political order that makes the life of the philosopher and philosophic inquiry possible. Instead, it could and perhaps should be used to shape political events, if at a safe remove. The conviction that the masses must not be instructed in the philosophic insights is of course a rather silly conceit. Even when Strauss first began communicating his ‘dangerous truths’ to his students, there were already far too many competing philosophies, ideologies and theologies for any one of

⁴ I. Kristol, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*. (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

them to undermine the political order by enlightening the masses. That Straussianism was capable of doing serious damage to public trust in government as an ‘ideology of elites’ is both evident from the disastrous record of the second Bush administration and something Leo Strauss failed to caution against.

The third solution is that the Straussians are members of a mutual-aid network. Halper and Clarke note that the network of political associations emanating from the University of Chicago in the 1970s present a framework of interrelated biographies for many of those considered to be among the rank and file of today’s neo-conservatives.⁵ That Straussians club together is no secret. However they do more than merely socialise. In university philosophy and political science departments, the Straussians propagate themselves and their creed by directing the resources of the departments they enter, particularly when making hiring decisions, and encouraging a focus on the personalities, methods and issues that other Straussians deem important. Such attention is good for Straussian academic careers, especially the careers of figures who would otherwise find the competitive work of getting published in peer reviewed journals too daunting. Straussians appointed to high public office use their own powers of appointment and recommendation to help the careers of fellow Straussians rise in political prominence. Straussians working as journalists in news sources or biding their time in think tanks engage in similar behaviors. In many respects, the Straussian network operates in much the same manner as an ethnic niche. Opportunities for advancement are effectively hoarded for members of the network. That so many of the leading lights among the Straussians are identifiable as members of American white ethnic groups—Eastern European Jews and Irish or Italian Roman Catholics—reinforces the impression that their universalistic moralising conceals a rather ordinary parochialism and individual ambition. The impression left is of individuals whose immigrant parents or grandparents suffered social discrimination in pre-war America and now feel compelled to thunder their gratitude at having been allowed into the once prohibited halls of power and privilege by denouncing members of other, non-white ethnic minority groups who are still outside and demanding admission without having ‘paid their dues’. Heilbrunn, for example, notes

⁵ S. Halper and J. Clarke, *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) pp. 67.

that Cornell became an academic hotbed of Straussianism because of what some white faculty perceived as the thuggish politics of the Afro-American Society.⁶

That gratitude may be tinged with a measure of guilt. Some neoconservatives are former Trotskyists or their offspring who marched ideologically from anti-Stalinism to liberal anti-communism and then onward to neo-conservatism.⁷ As many Cold War defectors learned, confessing one's guilt and asking for forgiveness offers political opportunity. Repudiation of their former leftist political identities is an unending process for some neoconservatives, because it serves as a vehicle to claim special authority on the subject of political tyranny.

A fourth and more complete answer is that Straussianism is attractive to its adherents less as a philosophy for the reflective individual than as an ideology suited to the operation of a network of ambitious elites, whose members seek to rise within the leaderships of well established institutions. Straussians occur more frequently in organisations that have reached at their zenith or that have begun to decline, rather than in organisations are still being constructed. Their textual analysis skills make them better suited to the climb up the hierarchies of venerable organisations than younger organisations where innovation is more in demand. There is more to this fourth argument but before elaborating it two challenges merit response.

The argument that Straussianism is an 'ideology for elites' rather than a philosophy may be challenged because it is not addressed to the masses, a characteristic common to modern ideologies. The problem with that challenge is that the alternative conclusion that it is a philosophy is even weaker. Ideologies are widely understood to offer an analysis of present conditions, a vision of better future conditions, and a plan for achieving such future conditions. During the 20th century, notes Richard Ashcraft, political philosophy became identified with abstract discussions of 'timeless truths' and 'perennial questions' in opposition to its deployment as political ideology, 'as a weapon

⁶ J. Heilbrunn "The Neoconservative Journey," in P. Berkowitz, ed., *Varieties of Conservatism in America*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 119

⁷ H. Wolford *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008)

or guide to practical action in the hands of a political group, party or class'.⁸ Strauss was among those leading the condemnation of the use of political philosophy as ideology. Yet that condemnation may be understood as an exercise in *taqiya*, or dissimulation in the presence of threatening power. In fact, Straussianism is simple rather than profound and encourages action rather than inaction, both of which are conventionally understood as characteristics of an ideology. Familiar conservative criticisms of the Enlightenment philosophy and of the negative social effects of modernity based on analyses of the Western classics and the American founding texts that comprise the parochial Straussian canon fail to make it profound. That Straussians covertly instruct one another in the art of advancing their careers by whispering advice in the ears of more powerful elites is hardly the withdrawal into contemplation that marks the traditional philosopher. For Leo Strauss the public duty of the philosopher was to speak in a manner likely to, 'move the city according to a standard existing outside the city, known to the philosopher and unknown to its citizens, but to do so in a way that seems in accord with the conventions of the city'.⁹ In effect, the responsibility of the philosopher is to act in much the same manner as a bureaucratic political appointee seeking to make public policy or a foreign intelligence officer seeking to influence elite or mass opinion in a target country. Straussianism thus offers elites in well established organisations the sanction they need to act together in a covert and undemocratic manner to achieve their political goals.

Another likely challenge to the argument that Straussianism is an ideology for elites is that when Straussians choose to descend from the realm of philosophy to the realm of the political they simply become neo-conservatives. In effect, Straussianism is a philosophy while neo-conservatism is an ideology. That counter-argument would be stronger if prominent neo-conservatives did not reject the characterisation of neo-conservatism as an ideology. Neo-conservatism, from their perspective, emerged because like minded thinkers shared similar opinions about major public policy issues. According to Irving Kristol, neo-conservatism is not a political movement but instead

⁸ Richard Ashcraft, "Political Theory and the Problem of Ideology." *The Journal of Politics*. Vol. 42 no. 3. (1980), pp. 687-705, 602.

⁹ N. Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*. (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 27.

merely a political ‘persuasion’ recognised only *post hoc*.¹⁰ Just as Strauss insisted on his distinction between philosophy and ideology, Kristol insists on his distinction because the word ‘movement’ suggests the sort of modernity that neo-conservatives are in the business of bemoaning. The self-described ‘godfather’ of the ‘persuasion’ begins his attempt at a definition by describing its distinctly American temperament. Americans are cheerful and optimistic, he explains, and so too is neo-conservatism. This is contrasted with the dourness and pessimism of the Europeans and other varieties of conservatism. Kristol thus acts as a proper Straussian ought by appealing to the citizens, ‘in accord with the conventions of the city’. One of those conventions is that Americans think of themselves as an optimistic people imbued with a ‘can-do’ spirit. Beyond the absurdity of such essentialist reductions of American and European character, it is worth noting that Kristol makes comparison only to Europe. Straussians are dyed in the wool Euro-centrists and as a consequence typically make comparisons only to ideas and events across the Atlantic.

Kristol goes on to admit in his essay that neo-conservative domestic policy preferences are essentially those of other American conservatives. They oppose government social welfare spending, support tax cuts, endorse government censorship of pornography, and are suspicious of the separation of church and state. With the eclipse of the paleo-conservatives, the neo-conservative foreign policy preferences identified by Kristol are now effectively identical to the conservative movement. Massive military spending, uninhibited military patriotism and uncritical Zionism are all basic elements.¹¹ This is simply a collection of policy preferences and little different from that held by other conservatives, it is reasonable to see neo-conservatism not as an ideology but as the public mask worn by the underlying ideology: Straussianism.

Why would Straussianism appeal to elites? The ideas of another, more pragmatic political philosopher who embraced rather than rejected modernity, Albert O. Hirschman, suggest an answer. In his 1970 essay *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*, Hirschman laid out the

¹⁰ I. Kristol. “The Neoconservative Persuasion: What it was and what it is.” *The Weekly Standard*. Vol. 1008 no. 47 (August 25th, 2003).

¹¹ R. Swansborough. *Test by Fire: The War Presidency of George W. Bush* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

possible options of those involved with large organisations that were encountering challenges and failing to meet expectations, which is to say, nearly all large organisations.¹² Faced with poor performance, the employees and customers of firms, the members of interest groups or political parties, and the citizens of nation-states can choose to leave the organisation for an alternative, give voice to their unhappiness about the organisation, or express more fervent loyalty to the organisation. The loyalty option is more likely to be selected, according to Hirschman, where the entry barriers to an organisation such as initiation rites are high.¹³ Penalties for exercising the voice or exit options tend to be high. Political appointees and public intellectuals have typically paid high prices to achieve their statuses. They must survive the rigors of competition for places in their formal organisations and, if they are Straussians, also serve in the informal coterie of more senior Straussians. To exercise the voice option by protesting in place or resigning in protest would be too costly. Membership in a Straussian network results in dependence on the network of employment and access to platforms from which to speak if formal positions in government are lost due to alternation in the party in power, that moment when a new administration brings with it a different cadre of political officials. Exercising the loyalty option is also likely because it serves the ambitious in large organisations that are performing poorly, which is a good general description of the second Bush administration.

Consider the career of John P. Walters, a political appointee described as an ‘admirer’ of Leo Strauss by the *Economist*.¹⁴ Although not trained as a physician, biomedical researcher or law enforcement officer, Walters was appointed as the second Bush administration’s Director of National Drug Control Policy or ‘Drug Czar’. His qualifications for that position included having been appointed as chief of drug interdiction under first Bush administration drug czar William Bennett, and of earning a reputation for ‘talking tough’ about crime while outside government during the Clinton administration. Before his stint as drug tsar, Walters was best known for having

¹² A. O. Hirschman. *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

¹³ Ibid. pp. 92-98

¹⁴ “Philosophers and Kings.” *The Economist*. Vol. 367, no. 8329. (June 21st, 2003): p. 29.

coauthored a book with William Bennett and John J. Dilulio, *Body Count: Moral Poverty and How to Win America's War Against Crime and Drugs*, that predicted the rise of young urban 'superpredators' destined to terrorise America.¹⁵ The authors did not need to state that these menaces to society were African-American or Hispanic because that was implicit in the message. Decoding the charged imagery was not difficult. The book's central policy recommendation was that the United States must overcome the 'moral poverty' that they claimed was the cause of crime by 'restoring' religion in American life. For the authors to have noted that Americans already presented markedly higher rates of religiosity, as measured by claimed church attendance in cross national surveys, than the citizens of most of the other advanced industrial societies, would have detracted from a rhetorical point pleasing to social conservatives. The anticipated waves of superpredators failed to materialise but did not prevent Walters from being appointed drug tsar.

As Drug Czar, Walters was unwavering in his assertion that the government was winning the drug war. Rather than answer the criticism that the legal prohibition has caused much of the social harm associated with drug use, he was content to insist that drugs such as marijuana were harmful to users and that prohibition was necessary to authorise the state to act on their behalf.¹⁶ Walters also exaggerated specific drug threats in an effort to elicit public support for prohibition. In 2008 his office issued press releases warning of a 'dangerous new drug threat coming from Canada' that Walters tagged as 'Extreme Ecstasy'.¹⁷ Rather than being a new drug, the substance actually combined the chemically similar methamphetamine and Ecstasy. Although the press reported the announcement, it did not spark much public concern. Walters' moral panic may have failed to launch because the source of the drug was insufficiently threatening. Successful moral panics about drugs in American history have been fueled by anxiety

¹⁵ W. Bennett, J. J. Dilulio and J. P. Walters. *Body Count: Moral Poverty and How to Win America's War Against Crime and Drugs* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996) pp. 26-34.

¹⁶ J. P. Walters "No Surrender." *National Review*. Vol. 56, no. 18 (September 27th, 2004) pp. 41-42.

¹⁷ Office of National Drug Control Policy Press Release "Canadian-Made, Meth-Laced Ecstasy Being Dumped into U.S. Illegal Drug Markets." January 3rd, 2008.

about exotic racial or ethnic minorities perceived as outside the moral community.¹⁸ Canadians do not fit that description even when laboring in drug labs.

Although its anti-empiricism operates as an intellectual prophylactic to understanding the economic, scientific and technical bases for entire realms of public policy making, the textual interpretation skills taught by the Straussians are useful for adherents because the management of powerful organisations in decline is one of manipulating meaning to minimise responsibility for decisions incompetently made and executed. There is a premium on organisational leadership that successfully avoids or shifts blame for poor performance rather than innovating when large organisations begin to fail. Consider the work of Douglas Feith, who was appointed the Director of Policy Planning in the Department of Defense under Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. To explain why his office had proposed rebranding the ‘Global War on Terrorism’ or GWOT as the ‘Global Struggle against Violent Extremism’ or GSAVE in early 2005, he stated that ‘terminology is what drives people what people think about this subject...If its called the war on terrorism, they think differently about it then if it’s called a struggle against violent extremism’.¹⁹ After leaving office he defended his role in planning the disastrous post-war occupation of Iraq during an April 8, 2008 interview on National Public Radio.²⁰ Asked about the criticisms of his role in the planning process levelled in other reports, Feith countered by dismissing them as narratives, ‘that came out of the top levels of the State Department’. For those trained in textual interpretation, one narrative interpretation is no better than another. When pressed to name who was responsible for the Iraq occupation debacle, Feith attempted to escape by spreading responsibility to the entire U.S. government:

‘I mean, I can give you a captain-of-the-ship type answer, where you say, well, the president is in charge or the secretary of defense is in charge or

¹⁸ Nachman Ben-Yehuda. “The Sociology of Moral Panics: Toward a New Synthesis.” *The Sociological Quarterly* Vol. 27, no. 4 (1986) pp. 495-513; D. Streatfield. *Cocaine: An Unauthorized Biography*. (New York: Picador, 2001) pp. 138-173.

¹⁹ B. Graham. *By His Own Rules: The Ambitions, Successes, and Ultimate Failures of Donald Rumsfeld*. (New York: Public Affairs, 2009): pp. 547-548.

²⁰ S. Inskeep. “Feith Regrets Not Pushing ‘Law and Order’ in Iraq.” *National Public Radio, Morning Edition*. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89429658> (April 8th, 2008).

the national security advisor is in charge. I mean, ultimately, when you're talking about political responsibility in the government, the top people are in charge. That's - but I don't think that was what your question was. I thought your question was where did the decision making process actually break down? And as I said, I only saw my window'²¹

Note that the Straussians begin to emerge in their neo-conservative guise as important decision-makers only *after* the Cold War battles of the 1960s and 1960s had already been waged and become dominant only *after* the defeat of the Soviet Union. During the 1950s and 1960s, American foreign policy was in the hands of Cold War liberal Democrats or moderate Republicans. The Straussians crop up in positions of power during the Nixon and Ford administrations and re-appear in even larger numbers during the Reagan administration, a moment when international communism Soviet style had lost its appeal as a model. Nor were their other chosen ideological enemies strong when they began to expand their influence in the 1970s. Anti-Semitism was just an ugly memory everywhere but the Middle East and a few pockets of atavistic nationalism in Eastern Europe. Support for Israel has been rock solid in the United States since the Johnson administration. With these enemies vanquished, the Straussians went hunting for domestic monsters to slay and joined the assault of the religious Right on multiculturalism, feminism, secularism and scientism. However it was the events of September 11th, 2001 that reinvigorated the Straussians by giving them a worthy international ideological enemy: Islamism.

Here the comparison between Straussianism and Islamism is useful. Peter Demant describes Islamism as, 'a reaction against modernity produced by modernity, during modern times, using modern means, and irreversibly partaking of modernity'.²² That description also fits Straussianism. Like the Islamists, Straussians see themselves not as establishing a new order but as restoring an older and better order. If they seek a less radical transformation of the existing order, they do so from within the engine of

²¹ Ibid.

²² P. R. Demant *Islam vs. Islamism: The Dilemma of the Muslim World* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), pp. 181.

modernity rather than outside it. The Straussian mission is to give conservative purpose to the immense power over nature created by modernity. Here the analogy between the Straussians and the Islamists crumbles. Where the Straussians seek to exercise power over mass publics who know they benefit, and benefit handsomely, from modernity, the Islamists seek to exercise power over mass publics who do not know they benefit, and have not benefited handsomely, from modernity.

The obvious historical analogy to the Straussians is to the education in the Classics among Victorian era British elites, which sought inspiration for the brutal business of maintaining an empire from the Roman example.²³ Classical education has long been a salient feature of the amateur tradition among senior civil servants in Britain. Latin provided not only a means for distinguishing elites from masses but some of the Classics provided philosophic justification for government decisions recognisable as morally repugnant to the uninitiated. This is reinforced by what Norton has described as the distorted, positive image of British imperialism common among neo-conservatives.²⁴

Barnett condemns the Arnoldian emphasis on the Classics and the certainties of Evangelical Christianity in the British elite education for undermining the pragmatism that had made Britain the greatest power of its time. The result was an elite incapable of adapting to international challenge in the Twentieth century.

‘In an epoch that required in men the itch to develop, create and exploit, school had fostered (especially in its prefects) a habit of routine administration-cautious ‘responsibility’ rather than the taking of risk. Where continued British success and survival depended on innovation and open-mindedness, school admired conservatism and conformism—loyalty to what existed’.²⁵

²³ F. Campbell “Latin and the Elite Tradition in Education.” *The British Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 19, no. 3 (1968) pp. 311-313.

²⁴ A. Norton *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004) pp. 129-130.

²⁵ C. Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power*. (Atlantic, NJ: Humanities Press, 1986) pp. 37.

Perhaps the best historical analogy is to the Neo-Confucian literati of late Qing dynasty China.²⁶ Like contemporary Straussians, the humanist intellectuals who ruled the 19th century Chinese Empire were masters of textual analysis, albeit of a different Classical canon. Chinese intellectuals were granted authority as Mandarins by demonstrating their mastery of the Confucian canon in competitive examinations requiring interpretation. They too inherited rather than constructed a powerful state—from the once dynamic Jurchen cum Manchus who established the Qing dynasty—and made it their business to preserve the empire by protecting what they perceived as the best in its cultural traditions and social institutions. The Neo-Confucian literati failed China, though not their own careers however, by their inability to sponsor lasting technological industrial innovation. Like contemporary Straussians, they held empirical science and engineering in contempt as lesser forms of intellectual endeavor unworthy of gentlemen. Very large, very powerful organisations sometimes take a very long time to collapse and ambitious elites may achieve professional success by climbing to the top of decaying organisations. The Qing dynasty would survive the rebellions of the 19th century before finally collapsing in 1911 due to the incompetence and corruption of its rulers and aggression by more modern foreign powers. Until the regime's collapse, the loyalty option remained the most rational choice for the ambitious Chinese elites. Straussianism has attracted ambitious American elites for precisely the same reasons.

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²⁶ M. Clabaugh Wright, *The Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism: The T'ung-Chih Restoration, 1862-1874* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1957) pp. 69-70.

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