

Leo Strauss and the Noble Lie: The Neo-Cons at War

by
John G. Mason

As our Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld once noted in an off the cuff remark, strategic truths sometimes need be defended by a “bodyguard of lies.”^[i] Here Rumsfeld was thinking no doubt of Churchill’s famous quip defending Operation Fortitude, the mock invasion force aimed at Calais that drew the attention of Herr Hitler and his high command away from the Normandy beaches and hid the Allies’ operational plans in the summer of 1944. Rumsfeld’s critics in Washington and London, however, have in mind more the history of contemporary philosophy than the history of WWII.

In the past few months, the “bodyguard of lies” metaphor has been redeployed and used to characterize the Bush Administration’s raw manipulation of the CIA and other intelligence agencies for propaganda purposes and for the gross deceit that seems to characterize the rationales put forward for their Iraq policy. Of these there were many--WMDs, a suspected connection between Saddam and Al Qaeda, or the humanitarian rescue of the Iraqi people. They shifted depending on their intended audience and perhaps the day of the week. The “imminent threat” of WMD’s were emphasized for the British public while links to “Al Qaeda-like terrorism” were stressed at home – where the fiction that Saddam was directly involved in the September 2001 attacks has been firmly embraced by over two thirds of the American public. As Olivier Roy rightly noted last May, “Washington’s stated war goals were not logically coherent, and its more intellectually compelling arguments were usually played down or denied.”^[ii]

By the summer of 2003 - when the hunt for banned Iraqi WMD’s had gone nowhere and the Al Qaeda connection to Saddam had disappeared into thin air along with Saddam and Osama themselves, the cumulative disappointment shook the official rationale for the Anglo American invasion of Iraq. This placed Mr. Rumsfeld and the civilian policy makers in his Pentagon group on the defensive and set them up for the critics who had been waiting impatiently in the wings during the short but triumphal march to Baghdad. Secretary Rumsfeld’s credibility problems had now become Blair’s and Bush’s nightmare—provoking a transatlantic media storm that has touched the political establishments of the co-belligerents.

In London this affair has mainly raised questions about the honesty of Mr. Blair and his press and defense secretaries. In Washington it has done so as well, and the prevailing view of the Administration’s war policy among its critics is summed up succulently by the *United for Peace* slogan: “Bush lies—Americans die.” But this affair has also raised a related and perhaps even more troubling question about the philosophical roots of the ideology that’s driving the “counter-revolution” in foreign and domestic policy within the Bush Administration. In short, the relation between strategic disinformation and political truth has been very much on our minds of late—along with some concerns about the lessons taught by Leo Strauss to the brilliant group of his former students who now occupy the seats of power in Washington

LAST MAY THAT SENATOR ROBERT BYRD OF WEST VIRGINIA gave the speech on the Senate floor that marked the moment when Bush's Iraq policy began to seriously unravel. "The truth," he said, "has a way of asserting itself despite all attempts to obscure it. Regarding the situation in Iraq, it appears to this Senator that the American people have been lured into accepting the unprovoked invasion of a sovereign nation, in violation of long-standing international law, under false premises." He concluded, "We just fought a war that didn't need to be fought." And of course, Byrd assumes that "unnecessary wars" can never be just. But if proven this charge alone would constitute technical grounds for the impeachment of the President for "high crimes and misdemeanours"—as Senator Bob Graham of Florida pointed out last July.

The principal false premise in question was the claim that Saddam possessed an arsenal of chemical and biological terror weapons that was both operational in March and an immediate threat to the security of the United States, that is, an "imminent threat." This is no small matter. This was the central claim made by Colin Powell and Jack Straw at the UN Security Council in order to justify the immediate use of military force against the Iraqi regime. This was the claim that justified the charges of disloyalty and unfaithfulness that put Jacques Chirac, Gerhard Schroeder and Hans Blix on trial in the American and the British media for three long months. And finally this was the claim that—along with the baseless assertion that Saddam was a full partner with bin Laden's terrorists in the attacks on New York and Washington—finally persuaded a reluctant and divided American public to rally behind their President during the Second Iraq War. But since the invasion ended, as we all know, these claims have been very much in doubt. Both on the ground in Iraq where American weapons inspectors reported having found nothing after a fruitless search for the missing chemical and nuclear arsenal and in London and Washington where this "intelligence failure" has become a major political scandal.

By June, the "policy and intelligence fiasco" had triggered a flood of leaks from the CIA, the DIA and the State Department as the battle between Rumsfeld's Neo-Con warriors in the Pentagon and the "realists" in Powell's State Department and the CIA broke into the public arena.^[iii] And it was revealed that last year our Secretary of Defence set up his own in-house intelligence service, The Office of Special Plans (nicknamed the "Cabal") to compete with both the CIA and the DIA. In the policy battles that raged throughout the summer and fall of 2002 within an administration deeply divided over its Iraq policy, this Pentagon group won almost all of the policy fights and as we say, "got their war on."

But by this past Spring retired intelligence officers from the CIA and senior diplomats from the State department had begun to complain that Rumsfeld's Pentagon "hot garbage" from Iraqi defectors around Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress directly to the White house in an exercise of "faith-based intelligence" where the Pentagon knew beforehand "what they wanted the intelligence to show." They argued that the Neo-Conservative faction in the Pentagon was guilty of "grossly manipulating" intelligence data in order to shape public opinion. In the view of groups like "Veteran Intelligence Agents for Sanity," Rumsfeld's decision to create his own intelligence service with a "stovepipe" leading directly to Oval Office set the stage for "hyping" to the national media whatever reports supported the Rumsfeld line on Iraq and eventually to passing off forged documents like the infamous Niger uranium memo to the highest levels of the Administration, to the U.S. Congress and eventually to the UN Security Council. They said this to anyone who would listen, and among those who did was Nicholas Kristof who put their charges against the "Pentagon crazies" on the Op-Ed pages of *The New York Times*—the main newspaper of the establishment opposition.

The flap over intelligence issues in the summer of 2003 immediately recalled to mind the controversy over the Pentagon's *Office of Strategic Influence* which had flared up in the Spring of 2002 with regard to Donald Rumsfeld's proposal to conduct orchestrated media campaigns to achieve "strategic influence" with foreign public opinion. The manipulation of intelligence reports was seen as but one piece of a broader campaign of "information warfare"—where the Pentagon and British MOD jointly managed media stories before and during the Iraq conflict in ways that targeted the American and

British domestic opinion. Sam Gardiner, a retired Air Force Colonel and professor at the National War College, analysed some fifty different stories in the U.S. and UK that were planted in the press as part of a strategic information warfare campaign to win public support for the war and to isolate and punish opponents. We should note in passing that among the privileged targets of this disinformation campaign were the French and German governments—who were subjected to a mean spirited but very effective campaign of disinformation which helped stoke public anger in the U.S. against “Old Europe” and spark consumer and travel boycotts against these two countries.

These operations were carried out by the Pentagon “Office of Strategic Influence” which after being announced in the Spring of 2002, was dissolved—officially—in the Fall in the face of the public reaction against the idea that the US Government would knowingly plant false stories in the foreign press. But apparently the disinformation campaign went ahead as planned even after the office was disbanded—only with a different target audience in view. As Donald Rumsfeld remarked in a November 2002 press conference: “If you want to savage this thing, fine, I’ll give you the corpse...but I’m *gonna* keep doing every single thing that needs to be done and I have.” And we can be sure that he did it with a smile.

In May 2003, the charges that U.S. Intelligence had been politically compromised were reinforced in by an inept attempt by Under-Secretary Wolfowitz to downplay the importance of the missing WMDs when he told *Vanity Fair* that the issue of Iraqi WMDs had been emphasised in the run-up to the war only “for bureaucratic reasons. It was the one reason everyone could agree on.” This effort at political damage control backfired and in a matter of days, the issue of the missing WMDs went from being a story told on the back pages to the lead article for *Time*, *Newsweek* and *US News and World Report*. *Newsweek* for example, gave the story to Michael Isikoff, their top investigative reporter who had dogged the Clintons for years throughout the Whitewater and Monicagate scandals. Clearly by this July, blood was in the water and the media sharks were circling Rumsfeld’s Pentagon.

The next step in the evolution of this affair followed from Seymour Hersh’s report in the May 5th issue of *The New Yorker* that the head of Rumsfeld disinformation operation was none other than one Adam Shulsky, a “Straussian” conservative,” who had once co-authored an article on Leo Strauss and role of deception in intelligence operations. The significance of this link went beyond Strauss’ belief that the inter-state relations were characterized by rivalries that often dealt in the currency of deceit and deception. What cut to the heart of the current affair was his belief, as William Pfaff put it, “that the essential truths about society and history should be held by an elite, and withheld from others who lack the fortitude to deal with truth. Society, Strauss thought, needs consoling lies.”^[iv] This concept of the “consoling lie” became the journalistic key to how and why the Office of Special Operations had in the words of one of its staffers, Lt. Colonel Karen Kwiatkowski, carried off: what she describes as “a subversion of constitutional limits on executive power and a co-optation through deceit of a large segment of the Congress.”

Neo Conservatives and the Strauss Connection

HERSH’S REPORT GAVE THE UNFOLDING STORY of bureaucratic competition and deception campaigns a new philosophical twist. Not content to denounce a neo-conservative cabal for the disinformation campaign that helped them sell the Iraq war to the Bush Administration, the Congress and finally the American and British publics, critics now drew the philosophical pedigree of Rumsfeld’s Pentagon group into the debate. Quickly the members of the Cabal were dubbed the “Leo-Cons” in *The New York Times* to highlight their connection to political philosophy of Leo-Strauss—an émigré German professor of political philosophy who had taught at the University of Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s.

But other political pedigrees have been suggested for this group. Michael Lind for instance traced their roots back to the right wing Shactmanite faction of the American Trotskyite movement who

entered the Democratic Party in the 1960s and then split with the Left over the Vietnam War. Many members of this group continued their rightward itinerary by rallying to Senator Scoop Jackson's campaign against the New Democrats. Some finished with the Democratic Leadership Council, while others found a home in the Reagan and now the Bush *files* administrations. Other critics who promote an "Iran-Contra *bis*" scenario for the current flap over intelligence trace the group back to the policy cabal that had promoted the Contra war against the Sandinistas and who had lost their power and influence in the second Reagan Administration as a result of the Iran-Contra hearings of the late 1980s.

But in the midst of the growing press fury, it was the Straussian connection that stuck and the one writer who appeared as the most reliable guide to whom critics and journalists turned was Shadia B. Dury, the Canadian academic who had published her *Leo Strauss and the American Right* in 1999. Long quotes citing her as an authoritative source soon began to appear in the progressive press. At the same time, conservative critics dismissed her as a "liberal academic" who had "made a career of writing anti-Straussian exposés," and in particular, one self-declared Straussian, Robert Locke, criticized her *Leo-Strauss and the American Right* as a "snide, careless and inaccurate piece of liberal boilerplate." More to the point, Dury's recent claims about the links between Strauss, Straussians and Bush's Foreign Policy have been rejected by Mark Blitz, (Professor at Claremont's McKenna College and former Associate Director of the USUA under Reagan), because "Despite ... Dury's bluster, she give no coherent reason why Strauss' students in the Bush Administration support the war in Iraq. [\[V\]](#)" As we shall see, Strauss, the Straussians and their critics as well have all been drawn into latest edition of America's "culture wars" and find themselves at the epicenter of a distinct media storm of their own that has grown into an international *affaire*.

The Neo-Con Network and the Strauss School

IN ANY CASE, DURY IS QUITE RIGHT TO POINT OUT THAT many of the most visible Neo Conservative figures within the ranks of the Bush Administration and among its house intellectuals who reside at the American Enterprise Institute and write for the *Weekly Standard*, have some kind of connection with Leo Strauss. Or if not with the Master himself, then at least with his most visible disciple, Allan Bloom, who taught at the University of Chicago in the 1970s and 1980s. Dury sums up her case about the Straussians connection to the Iraq war plainly: "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 State. Now that the lies have been exposed, Paul Wolfowitz and other in the war party are denying that these were the real reasons for the war." Paul Wolfowitz, Under Secretary of Defense, and one of the accused, freely admits to having taken one course with Allan Bloom, but denounces the whole idea of a Neo-Straussian cabal as "the product of fevered minds who seem incapable of understanding that 9/11 changed a lot of things and who search for a conspiracy theory to explain it."

But whatever their relation to the authentic thought of Strauss, the Straussians represent a distinct generational cohort. Among their alumni are other Pentagon officials, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, the Chair of the National Defense Policy Board, Stephen Cambone, the Under Secretary of Intelligence, Elliot Abrams of the National Security Council and Adam Shulsky already mentioned. These are members of coherent neo-conservative group of policy makers that have served together in since the Reagan administration and who often socialize together as well. And given their willingness to look out for one another's offspring, the network has a multi-generational dimension that passes membership and ideological belief from father to son as is the case, for instance, with Irving Kristol of *Commentary* who beget William Kristol of the *Weekly Standard*.

As William Pfaff notes, before the Straussians' entry into their ranks, Republican conservatives were distinguished mainly by their intellectual poverty, and for that the brilliant "inverted Trotskyism" of the Straussians provided a remedy. Today they represent a broad network that cuts across the

neo-conservative wing of the Republican Party as well as a distinct intellectual school that has colonized Political Science and History departments as well as Law school faculties. The list of Straussian students is an impressive one at least for their political influence if not always for their intellectual coherence: Justice Clarence Thomas; Robert Bork, Supreme Court nominee; Alan Keyes former Assistant Secretary of State and Anti-Abortion Presidential candidate; William Bennett, former Education Secretary; John Podhoretz, the former New York Post Editorialist, and John T. Agresto, former National Endowment for the Humanities Deputy Chair, among others. They represent the warrior elite of the Intellectual Right of the Reagan era who especially distinguished themselves in their service in the long but ultimately failed campaign to hunt down President Clinton in the 1990s and thereby to reverse the cultural settlement of the post 1960s. In the wake of 9/11, many were called out of retirement to rally the country behind the “War on Terrorism” and do battle in the media with the “Blame America first crowd” among liberal academics.

All and all then, the Straussians are an exceptional intellectual and social movement. As Karl Jahn observes: “The greatest peculiarity of Straussianism is that there is such a thing. Not a single other “conservative thinker” has inspired a following remotely comparable, in size, continuity and influence to that of Leo Strauss. There is a Straussian School as there is no Weaverian or Burnhamite or Meryeran or Kendallist school. And this school has its own interest, ideas and purposes, which are clearly distinct from mainstream conservatism.”

But their influence is especially strong in the right wing policy think tanks in Washington—most notably the American Enterprise Institute (AEI)—set up by conservative foundations such as the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. President Bush saluted the AEI as the home to “twenty of the best minds” in his administration, and it was their annual dinner in February 2003 that he gave his clearest defense of his invasion of Iraq. Echoing the Wolfowitz argument for regime change in Iraq as the key to regional transformation, Bush declared that the liberation of Iraq was about bringing democracy to an entire region and Islam into the modern world. The audience at the American Enterprise Institute was understandably thrilled because his speech meant that the “Richard Perle School” had won its battle for the President’s heart and mind at least for the duration of the war. Radiating the sublime self-certainty that can only come from the place where evangelical faith meets worldly inexperience, our Warrior President committed us to making over not just one Arab dictatorship but all of them at once.

The importance of this speech then was as much about where it was said as what was said. The AEI is the Washington think tank that housed most of the strategic thinkers—Perle, Donnelly, Muravchik, and others—who lead the charge for war with Iraq during their years of exile under Clinton. Home base for the “Project for a New American Century,” whose authors dominate decision-making at the Bush Pentagon, this group has also been instrumental in aligning the administration’s Mid East policy with that of Ariel Sharon’s Likud. In the view of many critics the political kinship with Likud is as or more important than any lingering association with Leo Strauss for explaining the Neo-Conservative worldview.

In the reigning neo-conservative view, then, the Iraq war was a “a bold and daring project” to reshape the map of the Middle East by applying the “shock and awe” of battle to break down barriers to westernization—as though western armies from Napoleon to Dayan hadn’t already tried the application of brute force in 1799, 1918, 1956, and 1967. But for the Neo-con theorists, warfare remains the preferred means for administering shock therapy to the Mid East. In the event, things have turned out somewhat differently than expected. Conquering Iraq proved easier than occupying it, and far from breaking Islamist morale, the Bush conquest has instead turned Iraq into a magnet for violence attracting every available fedayin in the Middle East.

But the Iraq project is questionable on other grounds than its sheer political naiveté, for if we are to believe Shadia Dury, the *Neo-Khans’* preference for belligerence is as much philosophical as it is political and has less to do with the defense of liberal democracy than some might think. She argues that we should treat Neo-Conservative enthusiasm for the spread of democracy with great skepticism

because: “The idea that Strauss was a great defender of democracy is laughable. I suppose that Strauss 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.”

In explaining the real appeal of “Shock and Awe” demonstrations of military force, Dury points out that like Karl Schmidt, Strauss believed firmly that politics and the State are rooted in the maintenance of the “Friend/Foe” distinction. As she argues in her interview with Postel, for Strauss,

The global reach of American [mass] culture threatened to trivialize life and turn it into entertainment. This is as terrifying as a specter for Strauss as it was for Alexandre Kojève and Carl Schmidt... All three of them were convinced that liberal economics ...destroys 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. [Through war] Life can be politicized once more, and man’s humanity can be restored. This terrifying vision fits perfectly well with the desire for honor and glory that the neo-conservative gentlemen covet. 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 celebrates would ever come so close to political power... But fear is the greatest ally of tyranny. [\[vi\]](#)

In other words, Dury claims that Strauss believes that Men by their nature are inherently aggressive and can only be restrained by a powerful nationalist state. “Because mankind is intrinsically wicked,” Strauss once wrote, “he has to be governed. Such governance can only be established, however, when men are united – and they can only be united against other people.” And Dury adds that this means: “If no external threat exists then one has to be manufactured.” Heroic values are required for the accomplishment of this struggle and for this the egoism and utilitarianism of modern liberalism is both an inadequate and unworthy foundation. Apparently this was shown to Strauss’s satisfaction by the utter failure of Weimar Republic to resist the rise of Hitler. In his view, Weimar’s fate is the doom of all liberal democracies given enough time.

For Straussians like Mark Blitz, however, the American Republic has a unique chance of escaping this fate precisely because of its cultural and political “exceptionalism”—that is, because American political culture retained many pre-modern and illiberal cultural elements that have been lost in the rest of the modern world. Writing from a safe distance in Paris, Carole Widmaier in Paris defends Strauss from his disciples’ nationalist excesses; denouncing their americano-centric, “*point de vue absolutisé d’une nation ou d’une culture particulière... Il est moins grec que barbare.*” And citing Strauss’ maxim that “*le barbare étant défini comme celui qui croit que ‘toutes les questions ont été résolues par son propre tradition ancestrale,’*” “Widmaier condemns the Straussians that have come to power in America as much for their barbarism as having reduced Strauss’ esoteric philosophy to vulgar ideology.

After listening her defense of Strauss’s critique of tyranny grounded in a close reading of his texts, one can imagine Leo Strauss repeating after Karl Marx, “Quant à moi, je ne suis pas Straussian.” But then again, perhaps, Leo Strauss’ attitude toward American power in world was not so distant from that of his unilateralist disciples as Widmaier would have us believe, and certainly no less “heroic” in its potential imperial applications. Dury states that whenever he discussed contemporary international

relations, Strauss was fond of repeating the story of Gulliver and the Lilliputians. And more precisely of how: “When Lilliput was on fire, Gulliver urinated over the city, including the palace. In so doing, he saved all of Lilliput from catastrophe, but the Lilliputians were outraged and appalled by such a show of disrespect.” An apt image, then, for an American Gulliver today who shows strong exhibitionist tendencies and whose militarist urges push him to play the “*pompier pyromane*” around the world while “Old Europe” looks on in disbelief.

The Straussian Neo-Cons, then adopt a peculiar stance in the “Quarrel of the Ancients with the Moderns.” Essentially they argue that modern liberals are myopic dwarfs who actually have nowhere to stand philosophically – and certainly not on any ancient giants’ shoulders. For the Straussians modernity since Machiavelli has been a straight path to nihilism where all understanding of political virtue has been lost along with respect for a social hierarchy rooted in aristocratic values. To rediscover Virtue’s true meaning, they argue we must return to the classical schoolroom and the pagan philosophers where moral teaching began - but this is a path is only open to a select few. For the rest of us, a return to organized religion, what Strauss called a “pious fraud,” along with uplifting patriotic fables, are our only hope of avoiding the fall into total anomie. Given their rejection of modernity, it’s not surprising that Straussians should endorse a religious faith they don’t share as a necessary fiction needed to maintain good order among the masses. It is perhaps from this that comes the embrace of the Evangelical Christian Right by secular intellectual Jews as political allies within the Republican Party and of “Christian Zionists” by their Likud friends from Israel.

Dury work forces us to ask what qualifications if any the Neo-Straussians have for undertaking the democratic modernization of the Mid-East as a “generational project”—given their own skepticism about democracy and liberal modernity as a political projects. “They really have no use for liberalism and democracy,” Dury remarks, “but they’re conquering the world in their name...” This suggests that the Neo-Cons are something more complicated than the *Wilsoniens bottés* that Pierre Hassner has dubbed them. They’re too wedded to a radical critique of liberal modernity and to their alliances with Protestant fundamentalists Ayatollahs to be considered reliable friends of democracy in the Middle East or indeed anywhere else – and most especially at home.

In helping us pose these political questions, Shadia Dury may sometimes slip into a partisan, polemical mode—as her critics suggest—but perhaps we might forgive her blunt Canadian way of speaking. In America, the Neo-Cons and the Religious Right are winning our culture wars, and the hour is already late. Liberal democrats in North America no longer have the time or the luxury of arguing the other side’s position better than their opponents. Indeed, they must first understand their own position and argue it without reservation. This is something at least that Shadia Dury does not hesitate to do.

Notes

[i] See Donald Rumsfeld, News Briefing, U.S. Dept of Defense, September 25, 2001, p. 1.

[ii] On the conflict between the official diplomatic line and real strategic rationale for the invasion see Olivier Roy’s Op-Ed column, “Europe will not be fooled again,” *The New York Times*, May 13, 2003.

[iii] See Sonni Efron, “Diplomats on the Defensive,” *The Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 2003 www.latimes.com.

[iv] William Pfaff, “The Long Reach of Leo Strauss,” Op-Ed, *International Herald Tribune*, May 15, 2003.

[v] See Mark Blitz's reply to Dury, "Leo Strauss, the Straussians and American Foreign Policy," *Open Democracy*, November 14th, 2003, www.openDemocracy.net, p. 1.

[vi] Danny Postel, "Noble lies and perpetual war: Leo Strauss, the neo-cons, and Iraq," www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-2-95-1542.jsp.

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