The Truth about Leo Strauss

Political Philosophy and American Democracy

Catherine and Michael Zuckert

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politics” motif. They made limited claims, and the claims they made are not in any way puzzling, even if one may be inclined to dissent from some of them, as we are.

The number of public allegations of links between Strauss and Washington made a quantum leap with the publication of a 1994 op-ed piece in the *New York Times* by Brent Staples. Although he wrote it during the Democratic Clinton administration, Staples was concerned about conservative ideas that had become or were “poised to become… central… [to] this country’s social policy.” He was remarkably ill-informed about Strauss’s views, but he asserted quite assuredly that Strauss’s “ideas have crept into vogue in American politics.” “Strauss,” he intoned, “appealed to the conservative elite because he viewed the status quo as an expression of divine will.” Staples named two individuals in or near practical politics who bear the mark of Leo. Strangely, the two he named, Thomas Sowell and Robert Bork, had nothing whatever to do with Strauss. He also named two writers of books more distant from politics, Allan Bloom and William Henry, author of *In Defense of Elitism*. Like Bork and Sowell, Henry had nothing to do with Strauss; his book never mentions Strauss or draws on Straussian ideas. Bloom was indeed a student of Strauss’s, and his best-selling *Closing of the American Mind* did make use of Straussian thought. This appears to have been a lucky hit for Staples, however, for what he said about Bloom’s book does not make one confident that he had read either it or any of Strauss’s writings.

Staples’s attempts to link Strauss to the politics of the day were also less puzzling than the current wave of such efforts. Staples, like Burneyat, had a special reason to hit upon Strauss. As he recounts in his article, he arrived at the University of Chicago for graduate studies in 1973, the year of Strauss’s death. He was thus aware of Strauss as a Chicago figure and connected him with Bloom, who was returning to Chicago in the years Staples spent there and whose *Closing of the American Mind* became a major item in the culture in the years between Staples’s attendance at the University of Chicago and his writing of his op-ed piece.

Staples’s screed revealed something of the power of the *New York Times* editorial page, for his assertions were bandied about in both liberal and conservative media outlets, producing the first wave of interest in Strauss in such places. This flurry of interest did not last long, nor was it so widespread as the recent wave of Strauss-in-the-news. Perhaps the coup de grâce was administered to this mid-nineties round of interest in Strauss by a thoughtful, if sometimes inaccurate, article in the *New York Times* by Richard Bernstein. Unlike many of the writers in the wake of the Iraq War debate, Bernstein did read at least one essay by Strauss, and his reading led him to conclude that Strauss’s ideas were “not… especially conservative,” nor was his elitism, such as it was, incompatible with democracy.

The character, intensity, and quantity of interest in 2000 and after are thus very different from the earlier interest shown in Strauss’s alleged influence on politics in America, as well as being much more puzzling. A clue to the puzzle appears in several of the recent mainstream media essays. In June 2003, after the Strauss craze had erupted in the mainstream media, Robert Bartley published a piece in the *Wall Street Journal* recounting the boost made by a member of the Lyndon LaRouche organization that the media were following LaRouche into what Bartley called “the fever swamps” of anti-Strauss fulmination. Bartley himself was somewhat uncertain whether to credit the LaRouchite claim to have pioneered the Strauss “exposé,” but there is evidence to support their claim. In the first place, LaRouche and his people were on the Strauss story well before the regular media got to it. The first irruption of Strauss into the reputable media in the United States (in this round of interest) was the James Atlas “Leo-Cons” article of May 4, 2003. However, Atlas was preceded by the April 19 article in *Le Monde* by Frachon and Vernet. They, in turn, were preempted by a salvo of publications, press releases, and other communications about Strauss, the neocons, and Bush foreign policy emanating from the LaRouche organization. LaRouche wrote an essay dated March 5, 2003, titled “The Essential Fraud of Leo Strauss,” which was followed up by a number of essays and press releases by LaRouche himself or members of his group all through March and early April.

The LaRouche materials clearly did not go unnoticed, for Atlas in the “Leo-Cons” piece makes reference to “intellectual conspiracy theorists” who claim that “the Bush administration’s foreign policy is entirely a Straussian creation.” This is certainly a reference to the LaRouchites, for they are the only “conspiracy theorists” at that time positing a connection between Strauss and Bush foreign policy. The *Economist* in June, shortly after Bartley’s *Wall Street Journal* editorial, also identified the LaRouche literature as the origin of the buzz about Strauss and Bush foreign policy.

It is likely, moreover, that the relatively early essay by Frachon and Vernet was influenced by the LaRouche literature, also. One aspect of the chain of writings particularly suggests a link between the LaRouche materials and the Frachon-Vernet essay: the latter identifies the two “master thinkers” of the neoconservatives as Strauss and Albert Wohlstetter. In one of the LaRouche essays predating Frachon and Vernet, the parallelism between Strauss and Wohlstetter is drawn via their twin presence.
in the background of Paul Wolfowitz. (Interestingly enough, both Jeffrey Steinberg, the LaRouchite, and Frachon and Vernet are more careful in their presentation of the Strauss-Wohlstetter connection to Bush foreign policy than Atlas is in the Times; for Atlas identifies Wohlstetter as a Straussian, which he most definitely was not, whereas the others keep him separate from Strauss, except in the influence both had on certain statesmen of the day, particularly Wolfowitz.) Beyond the Strauss-Wohlstetter point, another sign of a LaRouche influence on Frachon and Vernet is that all the people identified by the latter as Straussian were so identified in the LaRouche writings, with the exception of a few individuals in the media, who were not discussed by the LaRouchites. Finally, another very clear connection between the LaRouche materials and the mainstream media is the clear dependence on the LaRouchites of Seymour Hersh’s essay in the New Yorker about the Pentagon intelligence operations allegedly run by a Straussian, Abram Shulsky. Jeffrey Steinberg, in the same essay that highlights Strauss-Wohlstetter as mentors of neoconservative leaders, also discloses the Shulsky intelligence operation, well before Hersh’s article.

The conclusion to which the evidence is leading, we think, is that the “story” about Strauss began in the LaRouche camp and jumped from there to mainstream media—for the most part without attribution. This is not to say that the mainstream journalists took over the LaRouche line hook, sinker, and all, for the story changed a fair amount as it moved from the pamphlets and Internet postings of this fringe, if not quite lunatic, political group into the most august venues of international journalism. Nonetheless, it is a fact worth noting that that is the jump that occurred.

To trace the explosion of interest in Strauss back to the LaRouchites helps settle some of the puzzle surrounding this literature: the mainstream writers came upon the notion of Straussian under nearly every bed in Washington in the LaRouche literature. But that is merely to push the puzzle back one step: how did the LaRouchites come to formulate the theory of the Great Straussian Conspiracy? The simplest answer is that LaRouche and his followers are given to conspiracy theories and there need be no particular rhyme or reason to any given theory they develop.

Perusing the LaRouche literature suggests there is more to it than this, however. One of the earliest LaRouchite statements, by LaRouche himself, is less about the Straussian Washington connection than about Strauss’s way of interpreting Plato. It must be nearly unique in American politics that a presidential candidate—for that is what LaRouche was (and most of the anti-Strauss material was posted on his campaign Web site www.larouchein2004.net)—makes the interpretation of Plato a major issue in his campaign. The fact is, LaRouche fancies himself a Platonist and takes great issue with Strauss’s approach to Plato. Indeed, his objections to Strauss as a reader of Plato are remarkably similar to Burnyeat’s, for he objects to the presentation of Plato’s “anti-idealism.” LaRouche is a self-proclaimed “Promethean,” a believer in the (infinite?) possibilities of technological progress for the betterment of the human condition. Plato, he believes, underwrites this Promethean project; LaRouche maintains in his Web site that the Socratic dialogue expresses a principle of knowable certainty of truthfulness,…a method which undergirds the progressive achievement of knowledge, true principles governing the universe, which can then be ‘applied.’ The progressive adumbration of knowledge-based technology in turn allows the development of ever more egalitarian and wealthy societies. There are interests in society, however, some material, some intellectual, which put up roadblocks to this progress in knowledge and power.

Strauss’s approach to Plato, denying the progressive character of Platonic thought, is one such roadblock. Strauss is thus “a depraved anti-Promethean creature.” Strauss “tended to uproot and eliminate the idea of progress, on which all the true achievements of our U.S. republic had depended.” Because Strauss stands against progress (and reads Plato as doing so as well), LaRouche wonders whether Strauss is “actually human,” or instead a product of some kind of “reversed cultural evolution, into becoming something less than human.”

Eccentric as he may be, LaRouche appears to have read some of Strauss’s writings and to have had opinions about him prior to the debate over the Iraq War. He had Strauss in his sights before March of 2003 and thought about Strauss in a larger context than most of the mainstream writers did. Of course, when the mainstream media picked up the Strauss theme from LaRouche, they trimmed away most of the bizarre eccentricities and added some theories of their own. So, very little of the Prometheus–anti-Prometheus theme migrated over to the regular media. But two of the chief theses of the LaRouche literature did make the crossing: the strong claim that Strauss stands behind neoconservative thinking, especially on foreign policy and the war, and the notion that Strauss is a Machiavellian or a Nietzschean, a “child of Satan” or perhaps Satan himself, as the title of one LaRouche pamphlet suggests. It is the LaRouchites who produced the long lists of Washington Straussian that made it into places like the New York Times and the New Yorker.

Characteristically, the LaRouche version of the carryover themes is stated in more extreme and immoderate language, but the main elements
of what the mainstream press promotes as Straussian are present in nearly recognizable form in the LaRouche statements. In contrast to LaRouche's own promodern, proprogressive, prodemocratic Prometheusianism, Strauss is presented as regressive and fascist—even Nazi. According to one of the LaRouche statements, significantly subtitled "Leo Strauss, Fascist Godfather of the Neo-Cons": "A review of Leo Strauss' career reveals why the label 'Straussian' carries some very hefty implications. Although nominally a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany... Strauss was an unabashed proponent of the three most notorious shapers of the Nazi philosophy: Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Carl Schmitt... Strauss, in his long academic career, never abandoned his fealty to Nietzsche, Heidegger and Schmitt."  

The LaRouche writings constantly affirm the Nietzsche-Heidegger-Schmitt-Nazi filiation of Strauss, and then they group him with a surprising set of thinkers (mostly fellow émigrés), who allegedly stand for the same "fascist" principles. Thus LaRouche himself associates Strauss with Karl Jaspers, Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, and Jean-Paul Sartre; and to this "gang" Steinberg adds Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Leo Lowenthal.  

The grouping of Strauss with these others—a diverse group indeed, including some of the best-known leftists of our day, such as members of the Frankfurt School and Marxist existentialists like Sartre—is itself surprising, for Strauss is usually thought of as a man of the right-of-center with little sympathy for the "bedfellows" LaRouche is identifying for him. But the grouping the LaRouchites come up with makes a certain sense from their perspective. All the thinkers they name have in the first instance been influenced by Nietzsche and especially Heidegger, and all have reservations about modernity. From LaRouche's "Promethean" perspective, the differences between these thinkers are less important than their antiprogressive orientation.  

Thus Steinberg identifies "the hallmark of Strauss's approach to philosophy" as "his hatred of the modern world, his belief in a totalitarian system, run by 'philosophers,' who rejected all universal principles of natural law, but saw their mission as absolute rulers, who lied and deceived a foolish 'populist' mass, and used both religion and politics as a means of disseminating myths that kept the general population in clueless servitude." Tony Papert, another member of the LaRouche organization, expands on these themes: according to Strauss, "moral virtue had no application to the really intelligent man, the philosopher. Moral virtue only existed in popular opinion, where it served the purpose of controlling the unintelligent majority." Papert attributes to Strauss the nihilist views "that there is no god, that the universe cares nothing for men or mankind, and that all of human history is nothing more than an insignificant speck in the cosmos, which no source began, that it will vanish forever without a trace. There is no morality, no good and evil; of course any notion of an afterlife is an old wives' tale."  

These "truths" are so harsh, says Papert, that "the philosopher/superman is that rare man who can face" them. In order "to shape society" in the interest of those "philosophers themselves...the superman/philosopher...provides the herd with the religious, moral, and other beliefs they require, but which the supermen themselves know to be lies...they do not do this out of benevolence, of course."  

Their public face is all "exoteric" doctrine; they attempt to rule indirectly through "gentlemen" whom they indoctrinate with their false but salutary myths. Although the character of the connection to foreign policy is somewhat vague, the LaRouchites are consistent that there are strong foreign policy implications to their Machiavellian-Nietzschean-nihilistic philosophic stance: "Their policy is to permanently transform the United States, from a constitutional republic, dedicated to the pursuit of the general welfare and a community of principle among perfectly sovereign nation states, into a brutish, post-modern imitation of the Roman Empire, engaged in modern imperial adventures abroad, and brutal police-state repression at home.... Raw political power was the ultimate goal."  

Although the position is more immoderately and harshly put by the LaRouchites, we see in their writings the elements of the Machiavellian strain we have identified in the mainstream media literature on Strauss and Strawians. The regular media clip off the harsh edge and drop some of the more arcane references (e.g., to Heidegger and Schmitt), but they tell essentially the same story as LaRouche. However, they modify that story in one other way: there is no hint of what we have called the Wilsonian strain of Straussian or neoconservative policy as expressed in the mainstream media. The LaRouchites are more certain that anything that looks like this is pure "exoteric doctrine."

Going Yet Deeper into the Onion: Shadia Drury

Beneath or within the mainstream media treatments of the Straussian invasion of Washington lies the journalistic-political propaganda of the LaRouche movement. A strange bedfellow for the New York Times and Le Monde, to be sure. But a close look at the LaRouche literature reveals that we have not yet reached the heart of things. LaRouche may have had his own personal views on Strauss as a Plato scholar and an
anti-Promethean, but the LaRouchite literature persistently cites and picks up theories from another source, which it adds to LaRouche’s indigenous ideas. Papert’s essay “The Secret Kingdom of Leo Strauss” relies on the work of Shadia Drury for its explication of the intellectual roots of Strauss’s thought. In that context, he refers to her The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss as “by far the best book on Strauss.” Steinberg in his “Profile” of Leo Strauss cites Drury’s other book on Strauss, Leo Strauss and the American Right, as the source for his list of Strauss-influenced politically powerful neoconservatives.45

Even when the LaRouchites do not cite Drury explicitly, it is clear to those who know her work that they are drawing from it. For example, LaRouche and his faction regularly accuse Strauss of following the triumvirate of “Nazi theorists,” Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Schmitt.46 This is a position originally developed by Drury in her two books, and when she put it forward, it was quite unique to her. Another major thesis in the LaRouche literature is the claim that Strauss finds Thrasyvachus to be the “hero” of Plato’s Republic, and not, as millennia of readers have believed, Socrates.47 This too is a position Drury pioneered. In other words, the LaRouche treatment of Strauss depends heavily on Drury: behind the eccentric and frequently kooky conspiracy theorists stands Drury, a scholar. The trail thus leads from the mainstream media to LaRouche and thence to Drury.

Drury’s influence on the discussion has not been entirely indirect via the LaRouchites. She has a direct presence in some of the literature, especially left-leaning journals and Web sites. In much of this material we find citations to Drury’s writings, in particular her Leo Strauss and the American Right, the book that (along with Robert Devigne’s Recasting Conservatism), in a nonjournalistic venue, pioneered the claim of the link between Strauss and neoconservative politics.48 Several such articles recount interviews with her about Strauss and his purported political influence, and in one case she posted a short essay on the topic on the Web site of an Australian foundation.

Drury stands somewhere behind the eruption of media coverage of Strauss and Straussians, but her own statements in the media are much closer to the LaRouche version than to what we find in the mainstream media. Perhaps her views are most concisely put in the conclusion to an essay she wrote in response to the Atlas and Hersh articles: “It is ironic that American neo-conservatives have decided to conquer the world in the name of liberty and democracy, when they have so little regard for either.”49 Drury dismisses the dual emphases we have noted in the mainstream media—what we have called the Wilsonian and the Machiavellian strains of the Straussian position—by referring to the distinction between “the surface reading,” appropriate for public dissemination, and “the ‘nocturnal or covert teaching,’” suitable for the Straussians themselves alone, but the true core of their thought and policy prescriptions.50 In her rendition, the Wilsonianism is surface, the Machiavellianism the covert or true doctrine. She rejects the Wilsonianism attributed to the Straussians by Hersh and others in no uncertain terms: “Straus was neither a liberal nor a democrat”; therefore his followers are most definitely not crusaders for the worldwide spread of liberal democracy.51

Drury’s account of Strauss is not necessarily more accurate than that found in the mainstream media or in the LaRouche material (we will argue that she is far from accurate), but it must be said that her account is at least informed by a serious reading of Strauss’s works. She is recognized as a major scholarly voice on Strauss, having written two books on him and his followers and a third book in which he plays a prominent part. Her voice has therefore been taken to be particularly authoritative by media writers and has had an undeniable impact on public opinion.

Although her first book, The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, was critical of Strauss, it was also marked by respect for the man. Strauss was, she said there, “an important philosopher worthy of study.”52 She admits to having learned from him, despite her ultimate dissent from his views. By the time she became a participant in the current more popular discussions, her tone had substantially changed. Although she is slightly more nuanced about it, she is the source of the ideas expressed so often in the LaRouche literature and sometimes suggested in the more mainstream literature that Straussian thinking is fascist or Nazi in character. She is the source of the notion, now frequently repeated, that Strauss was a student and follower of the triumvirate of Nazi thinkers: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Schmitt.53 Thus, in her public writings she has made such strong claims as these: “Hitler had a profound contempt for the masses—the same contempt that is readily observed in Strauss and his cohorts. But when force of circumstances made it necessary to appeal to the masses, Hitler advocated lies, myths and illusions as necessary pabulum to placate the people and make them comply with the will of the Fuhrer. Strauss’ political philosophy advocates the same solutions to the problems of the recalcitrant masses.”54

Drury’s interest in Strauss of course predated the current efforts to connect him to the Iraq War. She has been an important voice in this effort because she wrote an earlier book, well before the Bush presidency, tying Strauss to the “American right,” complete with a list of important alleged Straussians—many of whom, by the way, had nothing to do with Strauss
via their influence on the gentlemen, that is, ordinary leaders like George W. Bush or Donald Rumsfeld, who can be manipulated to manipulate the masses.66

Her Strauss therefore rejects all the elements of political morality we associate with liberal democracy as defended by modern philosophers like Locke or Kant. There is no “natural right to liberty”; the doctrine of natural equality is rejected; instead Strauss labors to establish the view that “the natural human condition is not one of freedom but of subordination.” His chief book “is a celebration of nature—not the natural rights of man . . . but the natural order of domination and subordination.”67 The people are “intended for subordination,” and in the final analysis the lies the Straussian elite must tell are for the sake of concealing this unpleasant fact from the people. The people need to be fed religion, and thus the Straussians have “argued that separating church and state was the biggest mistake made by the founders of the U.S. republic.”68

In sum, Drury is an extremely important voice in the current conversation about Strauss, Straussians, and American liberal democracy. She is the source and presents the best-informed, most articulate version of the anti-Strauss case that is now circulating in the general media. As the author of three Strauss-related books, she has been an obvious quick source for deadline-pressed journalists to consult. And the picture of Strauss they get from her is surely not a pretty one.

About This Book

Where there is so much smoke, must there not be some fire? That is the question we mean to explore in this book. Not to hold the reader in suspense for too long, we are going to argue that most statements about Strauss in the media and in places like Drury’s critiques are caricatures of Strauss’s political thought and of his relation to current policies and policymakers. Mistaken as these presentations of Strauss’s position have been, we argue that it is at least somewhat intelligible that misunderstandings of these sorts have arisen. On the one hand, Strauss is well known for his cryptic writing style, in which his own thoughts are unobtrusively intermixed with or presented via his detailed commentaries or interpretative studies of earlier philosophers. On the other hand, and substantively more significant, Strauss has left behind a complex and tension-ridden set of views about America and liberal democracy that make it easy to misunderstand his position. The most significant task of this book is thus not to sort out the claims and counterclaims to be found in the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal, the LaRouche pamphlets, and Drury’s various screeds, but to attempt to clarify Strauss’s complex and difficult understanding of and mode of advocacy for contemporary liberal democracy. That task will require that we explicate Strauss’s work as a philosophic project as well as a political one and that we explore with care his relations to postmodernism, to thinkers like Nietzsche and Heidegger, with whom he is often associated in the recent literature.

We also wish to explicate how Strauss’s thought has been appropriated or applied, not only by those who are involved in public policymaking, but even more by those who have remained in the academy and have devoted themselves to the study of American liberal democracy. As Gordon Wood pointed out more than a decade ago, Strauss’s students have made considerable contributions to the study of America and are generally recognized as some of the most significant scholars of the American founding, the American regime, and American political thought in general.

It is also well known that Strauss’s “disciples,” as Drury likes to call them, by no means form a unified phalanx. There are public and sometimes acrimonious disagreements between several of the so-called Straussians, many of which are often accounted for in terms of personality conflicts or in other subtheoretical terms. Our argument is that the differences among the Straussian scholars or factions are not nearly as trivial as that, but derive from thoughtful and often penetrating attempts to cope with the tension-ridden legacy Straus left behind him. We see two dimensions of tension around which Straussian schools have formed. The first concerns the dualism of Strauss’s project: it was in part philosophic, in part political. One school takes more seriously the philosophic and depreciates the political. This group is sometimes known as East Coast Straussians. Another faction, the so-called West Coast Straussians, do the reverse.

That distinction only begins to define the issues among the Straussians, however, for crosscutting it is the set of tensions particularly relevant to Strauss’s stance toward American liberal democracy. Simplifying a great deal, we might identify the three following propositions as comprising the core of Strauss’s approach to American liberal democracy:

1. America is good.
2. America is modern.
3. America is bad.

Readers of Strauss have had a difficult time understanding how he holds these propositions together, and the literature on Strauss reflects this difficulty. Those influenced by Strauss have had the same trouble, and it is our
thesis that the different schools of Straussianisms form around three typical solutions to the dilemma posed by Strauss’s three propositions. Each school typically rejects, or at least downplays, one of the three. The West Coast Straussians reject the claim that America is modern, whereas a third group, Midwest Straussians, are less convinced that modernity is bad, and East Coast Straussians are more inclined to emphasize the deleterious modern elements to be found in American liberal democracy. None of these schools endorse the politically monstrous views attributed to Strauss and Straussians by Drury or LaRouche.

Thus we have three chief goals for this volume:

1. To explain Strauss’s way of holding together his philosophic and political projects, which include his advocacy of a “return to the ancients” in philosophy and the endorsement, qualified, to be sure, of modern liberal democracy.
2. To explain and assess the work on American liberal democracy by those who have been influenced by Strauss, especially to elucidate the important cleavages among contemporary Straussians.
3. To assess the public buzz about Strauss and his so-called followers, who allegedly are behind much recent public policy, especially in the international arena.

Although our book is otherwise very different from Anne Norton’s recent Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire, our main topics to some extent overlap with the driving thought behind her book. She distinguishes Strauss himself from his students and both from groups she calls “the Straussians,” whom she explains are “the political Straussians,” those who have gone into government and the media and who stand behind Bush foreign policy. The main thrust of her book is to deny that “the Straussians” are authentic followers of Strauss, for whom she expresses great regard, or of the students of Strauss, whom she counts among her teachers and friends.

Our three goals in effect pick out the same three sets of individuals. We differ from her, though, in withholding the label “Straussian” from the last group, for we find that the case for a connection between Bush foreign policy and Strauss is much weaker than the media have made it out to be. Indeed, we wonder why Norton uses this terminology when her own argument more than anything challenges the Drurian notion that there is a real link between the authentic Strauss and the Washington “Straussians.” The fact that some of those in Washington who have been involved with Bush policy once studied with Strauss or with students of Strauss, or once knew someone who shook hands with a cousin of someone who studied with Strauss, is not a sufficient reason to identify that person as a “Straussian” or to connect his or her policies and political activities with Strauss. We are perhaps in a stronger position to make this judgment than Norton was, because we devote the bulk of our book to an exploration of Strauss’s political thinking. This gives us a solid basis on which to demonstrate that the media vision of Strauss and the Straussians bears little relation to reality and that the policies of the neoconservatives, whatever may be their merits or demerits, show little influence of and certainly do not derive from Strauss’s political thinking.

We spend most of our space exploring Strauss’s political thinking. We approach Strauss in the context established by the current discussions of him, but we attempt to go beyond that context to present a broader introduction to his thought, especially as it bears on the question of the character of American democracy. It is not a book narrowly focused on the recent Strauss controversies, then, but neither is it the book we might have written in some other context for some other purpose. We do not believe this is the last word on Strauss; after all, there have been several entire books written on individual essays of his. We have not attempted that kind of depth. We have aimed more at an overview, but even in that we have been selective. We do not, for example, dwell much on Strauss’s writings on Maimonides, the thinker Strauss was arguably most concerned with over his entire career. Nor do we explore his writings on Plato, the thinker he admired most, except as we are led there by our own particular themes. We do not claim to have gone as deep as might be required to probe the full depth of Strauss’s philosophic position. For example, we discuss his response to the thought of Martin Heidegger, but we have not attempted the book-length study that would be required to explore the way Strauss sought his way—a different way—back to the prephilosophic, as Heidegger before him did. We have thought of our audience not as those who have immersed themselves in Strauss’s writings, but rather as those who know his work slightly or perhaps not at all and have become interested in him either as a result of the recent media attention to him or because some initial acquaintance has led them to seek to know more. At the same time we hope that those who know Strauss’s work better will find some insight here that they did not have before. At least we are fairly certain that those who know Strauss well are likely to find an interpretation or two they will disagree with—a sign that we are not saying merely what everyone “knows” about Strauss.
Does the pious ascetic, or Farabi, or the Communist dissident provide justification for political leaders to lie to their publics, to engage their nations in wars for illicit purposes, to shamelessly manipulate the facts? The clear answer is no. As Strauss recounted, the lesson of the pious ascetic was that his "action was justified by compulsion or persecution." Such "compulsion or persecution" cannot be brought to testify for the alleged lies now blamed on Strauss.26

Yet there is, at the same time, a broader conception of the purpose of esoteric writing, not related immediately and directly to compulsion. Thinkers who wrote "cautiously," to use a favorite Straussian phrase, believed "that there are basic truths which would not be pronounced in public by any decent man, because they would do harm to many people." There are "popular views which are indispensable for all practical purposes," but which are not, strictly speaking, true. How far these popular views deviate from the truth will vary, of course, depending on what the views are. How obliged to these views any thinker may believe himself to be will depend on a variety of factors that cannot be stated in general terms. It may be the case, for example, that the popular beliefs in question are vicious and lead to much avoidable injustice.27 A philosopher may well attempt to counter such falsehoods. But it is possible that popularly accepted falsehoods may be very beneficial to many people, and the philosopher may hesitate to upset the consensus around them. An example Strauss may have had in mind is the common view among premodern peoples that their legal codes derive from gods. It does not require an atheistic philosophy to doubt that all legal codes have divine origins. The Athenian Stranger, the central philosophic spokesman in Plato's Laws, seems to have his doubts about the claim of the Spartans and the Cretans that their laws derived from Apollo and Zeus, respectively. But he does not find himself obliged to question the opinion: It lends authority to laws by associating them with the divine, and in the Stranger's view (and Plato's as well), law can always use authority.28 Even in modern times, James Madison spoke of the need to clothe law with the authority and veneration that age and habituation provide. He therefore rejected Thomas Jefferson's proposal that constitutional questions be reopened among the people periodically, even though he knew that not everything about this or any constitution was as good as it could imaginably be. The harm of disrupting habitual attachment to the legal order outweighed, in Madison's judgment, the potential gain from the public reconsideration of the constitution. Madison's point is very close to Strauss's and Plato's, and it demonstrates that Strauss's notion is not hostile or alien to liberal democratic commitments.

Strauss willingly accepts the label "noble lie" for this philosophic reticence, although he also says it can properly be called "considering one's social responsibilities."29 Strauss's emphasis was always quite different from that of contemporary commentators on his doctrine: they emphasize the "lie"; he emphasized "noble."30 They think he means to justify all lying to the masses by elites, but that is far from his point. The lie (if it is really that) is justified not because elites are superior to the masses and have a right to do whatever it takes for them to rule or maintain themselves; insofar as philosophic reticence or accommodation is justified, it is justified by the public good, that is, by the fact that some opinions held by the public do great good and, disturbing them, even if and when they are not strictly true, may do harm. The moral rule with regard to philosophic speaking is much the same as the rule covering most other public acts in which one may engage: does it serve the common good? When Strauss speaks of the common good, it is not at the level of policy proposals either, but rather concerns what we might call the background public opinion at the level of principle.

Does the Platonic/Strausian doctrine of the noble lie serve to justify the kind of alleged lies critics of Strauss like Drury, LaRouche, and Robbins lay at his doorstep? Does it justify knowingly misrepresenting the weaponry of Iraq in order to begin a war, the main intent of which is to focus attention away from a sluggish economy and thus help the reelection chances of the ruling party, as Robbins claims was the case with the Iraq war? The answer is a plain and resounding no. This is not to say that political leaders do not on occasion do such things. But again, they did not learn to do this from Strauss, and had they looked to him for guidance on the acceptability of such behavior, he would not have given them succor.

We have proceeded to this point on the tacit assumption that the defense or justification Strauss gives of esotericism would apply here and now and that it would, among other things, serve as justification for esotericism by him or his followers. This is the assumption of Drury as well. She sees Strauss's discussion of esotericism not as a thesis about writers of the past—she refuses to investigate and tends not to credit his historical studies—but as a manifesto or program for himself in the present. We can no longer take that assumption for granted, however, but must subject it to critical scrutiny.

Does Strauss's discovery and defense of the use of esotericism in the past serve as a justification or announcement of an esoteric agenda for him in the present? This notion too is filled with many ironies. Esoteric writing is a way, Strauss tells us, to convey secrets. The way to write esoterically is


15. Lenzner and Kristol, "What Was Strauss Up To?" For speculations on the role of "regime-analysis" in Iraq War policy analysis, see Rozen, "ConTract," 2.


17. Pfaff, "Long Reach," 2; Heer, "Philosopher," 2–3; Berkowitz, "What Hath Strauss Wrought?" 1; "Philosophers and Kings," 2; see also Lobe, "Straussian Waltz," 2; John


23. "Philosophers and Kings," 2; see also Brooks, "Character Myth."


25. Quotation in Heer, "Philosopher," 5. Lobe, "Straussian Waltz": Strauss was "elitist, amoral, and hostile to democratic government."


29. Strauss may also have been influenced by Robert Devigne’s Recasting Conservatism, which argued that American conservatism had been remade by the influx of Straussian ideas into it. He was also one of the first to argue for a firm connection between Strauss and neoconservatism. We suspect Devigne did influence Staples, because he attempted to draw policy connections between Strauss and contemporary conservatism, a link very much on Staples’s mind. Beyond its possible influence on Staples, Devigne’s book does not seem to have played much of a role in the developing popular story of Strauss as Svengali to President Bush et al. We did not find any other tracks of it in the later versions of the story of the Straussians’ ascent to power. (A possible exception is Drury’s later book, Leo Strauss and the American Right, a book with a subject matter rather similar to Devigne’s; she does cite Devigne.)


35. On the denial that Wohlstetter is a Straussian, also see Anne Norton, Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 182.


37. LaRouche, “Insanity as Geometry,” 9, 10.
38. LaRouche, “Essential Fraud,” 1, 4; LaRouche, “Insanity as Geometry,” 4, 8; Steinberg, “Ignoble Liars,” 3.
43. Ibid, 6.
44. Steinberg, “Ignoble Liars,” 2–3.
52. PILS, 4, 153.
53. See, e.g., Drury, “Saving America,” 3; also her Strauss and the American Right, chap. 3.
55. Ibid., 2, 1.

CHAPTER ONE
5. Diskin Clay, “On a Forgotten Kind of Reading,” in Leo Strauss’s Thoughts: Toward a Critical Engagement, ed. Alan Udoff (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1991), 257, calls attention to the fact that Strauss’s students have also produced a series of “strict new English translations” of Greek (and, we add, other) texts in the history of political philosophy.