

**Leo Strauss, George Bush, and the philosophy of mass deception –**  
Earl Shorris, Harpers' Magazine, June 2004

President Bush's advocacy of "regime change"-which avoids the pitfalls of a wishful global universalism on the one hand, and a fatalistic cultural determinism on the other-is a not altogether unworthy product of Strauss's rehabilitation of the notion of regime.

-William Kristol and Steven Lenzner

In the 1950s, inside the University of Chicago, then the most left-wing university in the United States, hidden somewhere among the graduate divisions, the accidental father of the worst in American politics taught Plato and Montesquieu, Spinoza, Machiavelli, and Hobbes. Leo Strauss arrived at Chicago when the hard sciences were in their ascendance there, not many years after the first nuclear chain reaction was created under the old West Stands of the abandoned football field. The newcomer was outgunned by the big-time Aristotelians, such as Richard McKeon, and despised by the doyenne of citizenship, Hannah Arendt. If Strauss and the logician Albert Wohlstetter, who was responsible for the Cold War theory of mutually assured destruction, knew each other at all, it was to nod in passing. Strauss and the social scientists found each other unbearable, for he disagreed with Max Weber, and the sociologists hated him for it. In worldly things Strauss suffered from arrogance and timidity, partly the result of the Platonist's anxiety: the fear that, like Socrates, he would be put to death for being a philosopher. Yet Strauss, with his endowed chair, more than stood his ground on a campus where Aristotle held sway. The renowned Committee on Social Thought never included Strauss, but he had disciples, and disciples have two duties: to sit at the feet of the master and to spread word of his wisdom. The "Straussians" have excelled at their work, for Leo Strauss is the most widely discussed writer on philosophy in our time.

The master, who bears a striking resemblance in some photographs to the comedian Jack Benny, had but one core idea: read old books carefully. It was a stroke of genius, and nothing more invigorating or enlightening could be said about education, but it was not news on a campus run by Robert Maynard Hutchins, one of the inventors of the Great Books curriculum. Strauss professed to teach other men's work; he had nothing of his own but commentaries and an attitude about himself and his own mind that infected the youth gathered around him. His disciples in turn methodically infected

and then corrupted the government of the most powerful nation on earth. They have done so not only recently but since first touching the Reagan Administration a quarter of a century ago in social policy and politics initially, then more particularly in the Department of Defense, until now there appears to be no end to the damage that is being done in the name of Leo Strauss.

I have been told many times that any attempt to write seriously about Leo Strauss for other than an academic publication is a fool's errand. Since I am accustomed to running such errands, I read the late professor's books, two books and countless articles about his books, and set out to say what he had said and how it had gained such influence over the current political regime. I failed at this, not once but several times: too abstract, too rabbinical, too long, too short, too difficult, who cares? It was easy enough to find popular articles about Strauss. They all made much the same case: all neoconservatives are Straussians. But they did not attempt to say whether all Straussians were neoconservatives. In fact, they did not appear to know what Leo Strauss had said about the philosophers or what his disciples had made of his work. The New York Times got the names of some Straussians in government right, but not the names of the institutions where he taught and the dates and other such arcana. Don't blame them, at least not for their ignorance of Strauss's work. Leo Strauss is more difficult to read than almost anyone, including Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Joyce at his most involuted and eloquent. The reason for the difficulty grows out of Strauss's intent: he believed in what you and I would call bad writing. He buttered it with the word "esoteric," but "bad" is the right word, unless you prefer "lousy." Here was a man who did not want to be understood by any but the few, his disciples. Obscurantism is a conceit, and it is an old technique. Every new religion throughout history has used it. Apparently Strauss had dreams of glory. He had no desire to be intelligible; on the contrary, if his work was to have any effect in the world it would be only as his disciples shaped it to fit the time. They were not marketers, these disciples. If Strauss had taught them anything, it was arrogance; they would remake the world in their own image.

Strauss himself lived and thought in response to the events of his time. He was born in Kirchheim, Germany, in the last year of the nineteenth century. As a young man he was an ardent Zionist, a student of the best philosophers of his time, including Martin Heidegger, whom he declared the most brilliant and original philosopher of the twentieth century. Strauss engaged in

research in Jewish studies, and in 1932, having seen what was to come, the prescient and perturbed young scholar left Germany, first for France, then England. While in England he wrote a book on Hobbes, an endeavor supported by a Rockefeller grant.

In 1933 news arrived in England of an event that haunted Strauss for the rest of his life. On German Armistice Day of that year, Martin Heidegger, the author of *Being and Time* and rector of the University of Freiburg, had delivered a pro-Nazi speech and allowed himself to be photographed in the company of uniformed Nazi officers and thugs. I do not think it is possible to overestimate the effect on Strauss's life and work of Heidegger's betrayal of philosophy. In 1938, Strauss fled Europe entirely, settling in New York City, where like many Jewish refugee scholars he taught at the New School for Social Research. War came the next year. In his forty years, Strauss had seen the start of two world wars, the beginning of the Holocaust, and the takeover of the Soviet Union by Joseph Stalin. He had himself escaped the whirlwind, which he saw as the collapse of the liberal democracies.

According to Strauss the fall of Heidegger was the hideous end of a progression of modernism that had begun with Machiavelli, whom Strauss regarded as the first modern philosopher. Strauss denounced Machiavelli as a "teacher of evil," not so much for counseling his prince to be ruthless in pursuit of worldly power as for betraying the principles of ancient philosophy. "His discovery," Strauss wrote, "is implied in the principle that one must take one's bearings from how men live as distinguished from how they ought to live." Prior to Machiavelli, philosophy had taken its bearing by the eternal truths; after him, philosophy was concerned with the ignoble reality of how men actually live. If this world had become intolerable, if history had gone wrong, Strauss believed, the only solution lay in the old books. Only the ancients could be trusted, only the perennial questions were worth considering. One had only to read them carefully, slowly, uncovering their secret teachings. Strauss attracted the students who thought themselves brilliant, and they worshiped him as the inventor of "political philosophy," which would have come as a surprise to Plato, Aristotle, and other authors of the old books he proposed to study.

Because he was an extreme conservative, many of the young men (there were no women, so far as I know, and his most famous student was Allan Bloom, a vicious misogynist) who sat at his feet were already dabblers in conservative or reactionary thought. They idolized Strauss as an earlier

generation had embraced Marx. They saw a chance to change the order of the world. In the excitement of this unlimited ambition, the Straussian cult was born. And Strauss died. He suffered a heart attack while teaching at the University of Chicago, recovered, spent a year at Claremont Men's College, and then taught at St. John's until the end came in 1973. Without question he was a brilliant professor, a frightened man whose ideas, having been battered into hiding by historic events, were eccentric. He had produced some journal articles, delivered the Walgreen Lectures, never to my knowledge appeared in the "public press," made no radio or television appearances, and during his lifetime found but a small group of readers for his books.

He died obscure and far from home.

It is safe to say that neither Ronald Reagan nor the Bushes have read Leo Strauss, and certainly no politician needs to be taught how to lie by a professor of philosophy.\* Perhaps William Kristol, while serving as Dan Quayle's chief of staff, tutored the vice president in the finer points of Platonic politics. But it is unlikely. The step from philosophy to action is almost always circuitous, Machiavelli being one of the rare exceptions. Strauss's ideas about ideas took the usual path, picked and poked and punched, mutating here, understood selectively there. At one time, Strauss wrote a sentence in which he opposed preventive war. How disappointed his followers in the Department of Defense would be to read it now in light of the wreckage they have made!

The career of Strauss's teachings is one of the wonders and the dangers of the book, as the master himself might have said, knowing that the long life of books, unlike newspapers or television, is bound up with history in a process of indirection. The ideas in books somehow manage to wiggle through the morass of individuals and information in large modern societies and become effective. The way is not clear, but the fact of it often gives surcease to the pains of laboring in obscurity. Sophists once proceeded by eristic (arguing to win rather than in search of wisdom), and they still do, but in our time it has become more efficacious to whisper in the ear of the king.\*

Strauss was content to write books in obscurity and to convey the ideas in them to a few students here and there over the years. These students carried on the work, teaching Strauss to their students, creating a growing network until there are now Straussians on the faculty at many, if not most, American colleges and universities. Since Straussians revel in the difficulty of the

master's work, they attract very bright students, many of whom will remain in the academy, producing other Straussian scholars, writers, activists, and members of government at every level, a cadre that will soon begin to think of itself as a class, that class for which Plato could find no better name than gold. Surely, this class does not, like Socrates, merit the hemlock for corrupting the youth, but it does merit more than finger-pointing. An argument should begin.

## THE GREATEST CLARITY IS A CONTRADICTION

For the uninitiated, "contradiction" is the key to the Straussian approach, and more than anything else it defines the Bush regime and its circle of influencers. The contradictory and absurd statements of George W. Bush need not be listed here. His collected solecisms have been published in multiple volumes and are scattered throughout the Internet. Donald Rumsfeld's most inscrutable utterances have even been set in verse. Such deformations of the English language are no accident: they reflect the administration's general pattern of communication.

Contradictions are not lies: they are nonsense, unreason. An axis of evil made up of countries that cannot be connected along any imaginable axis is a nonsense statement. A constitutional amendment banning marriage between people of the same gender would pit one part of the Constitution against several others—more nonsense. And when a State of the Union speech has for its peroration the problem of athletes using steroids, nonsense appears to be the preoccupation of the state.

A government would collapse if it spoke nothing but nonsense. Under George W. Bush the government has learned to speak on two levels at the same time. What appears to be non-sense to most people makes perfect sense to those who are initiated into a way of thinking and a certain set of references, many of them biblical. From the constant use of the word "evil" to subtle references to the Book of Revelation, the favorite text of endtime thinkers on the Christian right, Bush's remarks and speeches have carried an esoteric message.

In the only book he wrote in anything close to plain English, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Leo Strauss advised his readers not to write in plain English. Strauss followed his own advice. Convoluted, contradictory, arcane, clubfooted writing was his game. He worked at it. He skulked in the dark

corners of exposition, making it all but impossible for anyone to discern exactly what he thought. In all the history of the English language there had never been a man—not merely a man, a professor at a great university—who so publicly opposed clarity and so brilliantly demonstrated his talent for obfuscation. In his chosen field he was a giant.

Bad writing, unintelligible, contradictory writing, and systematic lying raises a moral question, as Strauss well knew. He ascribed his advocacy of bad writing, which he called "esoteric writing," to the possibility that a writer could be persecuted for what he said. If the writer lives in danger of death or imprisonment because of speaking his ideas clearly, to write as if in a code addressed to a small coterie of followers is not unreasonable. Strauss based his argument on the work of Moses Maimonides, a Jewish physician and philosopher of twelfth-century Spain. Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* was addressed to one of his students, himself a highly educated man. In the preface to the book, Maimonides clearly divided the world into those who could read the complex ideas of philosophy and those who could not. On the surface the *Guide* could be read for its interpretations of Scripture and its ethical prescriptions. But Maimonides said that a reader would have to be conversant with many philosophers and other commentaries on Scripture to fully understand the work. The same might be said of an essay by William Gass or a sermon by John Donne. Strauss argued that the *Guide* contained a secret teaching, a metaphysics contrary in some respects to the literal teachings of the Bible, that must be concealed from the masses, who would be unable to comprehend why God, for example, must necessarily be devoid of attributes. Such knowledge might turn the masses away from religion; such knowledge was necessarily dangerous. Strauss took the example of Maimonides and applied it not to commentary about metaphors and other difficult passages in the Bible but to contemporary political philosophy. He became midwife to the method of the American right.

Strauss claimed that clarity in a philosopher's work endangered both the philosopher and the world. Perhaps. Although he was born in Germany, Leo Strauss wrote all but one of his books in England and the United States, and he was not a homosexual, a Communist, or a person of color. Who would drag him out of his bed in the middle of the night to accuse him of adoring Plato or snuggling up to Aristotle? Who would put his small body on the rack to force a confession for the crime of promoting bad writing? Philosophers are not endangered in America, but if by philosophers we mean

Straussians, especially those in government, the world may very well be in danger from philosophers.

## WISE MEN TELL NOBLE LIES

The President of the United States told the world that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. His secretaries of defense and state made the same assertions. They claimed to be telling the kind of truth that enables good countries to go to war against evil ones. Secretary Powell showed drawings of mobile biological-weapons factories to the United Nations Security Council, and America went to war. From time to time after the occupation of Iraq was complete, the reason for going to war changed, for there were no weapons of mass destruction. Only a miserable dictator and the remains of a once prosperous country were found. As a result of the war the Iraqi people went from fear to fear and anger. The administration no longer spoke of weapons of mass destruction but of a terrible dictator deposed, the sweet flower of freedom planted in Babylonian soil.

One of the great services that Strauss and his disciples have performed for the Bush regime has been the provision of a philosophy of the noble lie, the conviction that lies, far from being simply a regrettable necessity of political life, are instead virtuous and noble instruments of wise policy. The idea's provenance could not be more elevated: Plato himself advised his nobles, men with golden souls, to tell noble lies-political fables, much like the specter of Saddam Hussein with a nuclear bomb to keep the other levels of human society (silver, iron, brass) in their proper places, loyal to the state and willing to do its bidding. Strauss, too, advised the telling of noble lies in the service of the national interest, and he held Plato's view of aristocrats as persons so virtuous that such lies would be used only for the good, for keeping order in the state and in the world. He defined the modern method of the noble lie in the use of esoteric messages within an exoteric text, telling the truth to the wise while at the same time conveying something quite different to the many.

For Strauss, as for Plato, the virtue of the lie depends on who is doing the lying. If a poor woman lies on her application for welfare benefits, the lie cannot be countenanced. The woman has committed fraud and must be punished. The woman is not noble, therefore the lie cannot be noble. When the leader of the free world says that "free nations do not have weapons of mass destruction," this is but a noble lie, a fable told by the aristocratic

president of a country with enough nuclear weapons to leave the earth a desert less welcoming than the surface of the moon.

## ALL MEN ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL

William Kristol has written that "Strauss, chiefly by way of his students, is in large part responsible for making the thought and principles of America's founders a source of political knowledge and appeal, and for making political excellence more broadly a subject of appreciation and study." America's founders thought it self-evident that all men are created equal, and yet increasing inequality has been the hallmark of the Bush Administration, as it was of the Reagan and Clinton administrations. Donald Rumsfeld's primary task under Ronald Reagan was to rid the country of the Great Society programs of the early 1960s. Irving Kristol, an early Straussian, advised Reagan and Rumsfeld and their staffs of the need to stop coddling hungry children, educating the poor, and helping the aged, the infirm, victims of prejudice. The current Bush Administration works more boldly toward inequality. It has adopted a tax system suggested by Grover Norquist, another Straussian, a man who publicly compared the inheritance tax to the Holocaust.

Robert Maynard Hutchins, the founder of the Great Books program, said, "The best education for the best is the best education for all." In 1959, Strauss wrote that "Liberal education is the necessary endeavor to found an aristocracy within democratic mass society." In one sentence he had stated his elitism and his distaste for what he called the vulgarity of democratic society. Three years later he made the ruling elite permanent: "We must not expect that liberal education can ever become universal education. It will always remain the obligation and the privilege of a minority." Arrogance follows elitism. It leads to cruelty, the capability, perhaps even the desire, to use people, to make them into things. No follower of Strauss can agree with Kant's description of human, dignity: man is not a means but an end in himself. The Straussians assign dignity to the few, and those who are deprived of dignity cannot pursue happiness. The study of Strauss's work does lead to thinking about the Founders: not how they would agree with the Straussians but how they would oppose them.

## DEMOCRACY IS THE RULE OF THE UNWISE OVER THE WISE

Plato believed that the wise should rule-and who could quarrel with that? But who then decides among competing wise men, and what should be the limits of the wise statesman's power? It is instructive to listen to Strauss: "It would be absurd to hamper the free flow of wisdom by any regulations; hence the rule of the wise must be absolute rule. It would be equally absurd to hamper the free flow of wisdom by consideration of the unwise wishes of the unwise; hence the wise rulers ought not to be responsible to the unwise subjects." Strauss explains that this would result in the subjection of what is by nature higher to that which is lower. His reading of Plato comes down to this: true democracy is an act against nature and must be prevented at all costs. Seen in this light, the Bush Administration's public claim to be bringing "democracy" to Iraq, all the while working to ensure that elections do not take place, takes on new meaning.

## NATURE ABHORS A CONTRACT

Long before the events of September 11, 2001, the Bush Administration-goaded on by Wolfowitz, Kristol, the American Enterprise Institute, the Project for the New American Century, and others on the right-had made a decision to oust Saddam Hussein. Bush seems to have had a personal vendetta, but the others had more philosophical reasons. There was nothing Machiavellian about the attack. It was based on principles the planners derived from natural law. One suspects that President Bush, with his simplistic messianic mind-set, was attracted to this line of reasoning: The natural law in the very hearts of human beings, the innate ability to know right from wrong, took precedence over mere convention. And so the Bush regime violated the contract that was agreed to when the United States joined the United Nations; it flouted the U.S. Constitution, which is also a contract, by attacking without the required declaration of war by the Congress; and it disregarded the Geneva Conventions in its treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and in other secret detention camps around the world.

The administration's wise men held up Strauss's version of natural law as the model, dismissing contracts as mere laws of men. Natural law, interpreted by Bush's "wise counsels," gave the President permission to launch a preemptive war through an appeal to the higher power. Natural-law theory assumes that men seek the good and that by asking the perennial questions-what is virtue? what is justice?-they will come to wisdom. Straussians, like Kristol, hold that the Founding Fathers espoused natural-

law theory, saying that natural law was both divine and self-evident. But the Founders were concerned with inalienable natural rights. After much debate in their convention, they wrote a contract.

## ATHENS LOST

In the U.N. Security Council debate over Iraq, the Bush Administration fielded its most respected and trustworthy figure, the Spartan Colin Powell. Like the Spartan ephor who lost out in argument to his warlike counterpart, Powell slowly lost power within the administration to the Department of Defense. A good soldier, he presented lies to the Security Council as if they were certainty. Philosophy won out over politics. There was no cabal, no secret agreement made in the dark of night; none was necessary: the faction that favored preemptive war had principle for a guide.

Athens, the democracy, weakened by plague, suffered a terrible defeat at the hands of oligarchic Sparta and its allies. Strauss, following Plato, did not grieve for the loss of Athens; the real city had been no match for the ideal city. In his view, the active life of the citizen of Periclean Athens suffered by comparison with the contemplative life of the philosopher. The Straussians in the Department of Defense and in the think tanks took this to mean that they could kill on principle. And they did. The first Bush sent his Spartan general to Iraq, and the second sent the same Spartan to the security Council. The Straussians could not call their work politics, so they called it virtue. They did not take note of the sentence the long dead professor had written that clearly opposed preemptive war. The convenient thing about natural-law theory, as opposed to convention, is that you can simply make it up as you go along.

## THE BEST FRIEND IS AN ENEMY

Strauss despised the Weimar Republic for its weakness in allowing the rise of Hitler. He thought the Russians who had permitted the MarxistLeninist takeover were equally weak and despicable. The Nazis and Stalinists had driven him out of his home, had murdered his fellow Jews. He feared the Marxists would take over the world. he said that Marxists, socialists, and what we now call liberals aimed toward the same goal. Only strength could withstand the on-slaught of these ominous forces, and the only way for a liberal democracy to remain strong was to have external enemies. Strauss provided a rationale for the will to power, the only means left of maintaining

the pursuit of virtue by noble men. The Straussian rightists took in his reading of the history of philosophy, manipulated it to fit their own version of history, and went to work. They began just after the Cold War and soon focused on their former ally, Saddam Hussein, who provided an opportunity for testing Albert Wohlstetter's ideas about smart bombs and precision targeting. As the rockets fell on Baghdad, the two old professors had joined forces at last.

## THE STUDY OF HISTORY IS THE ROAD TO PERDITION

Historical events as such had little to do with the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Wise men advised the President to do what he thought was right. Bush consulted with heaven, not with events on earth, and heaven, as he often said in the esoteric part of his speeches, told him what to do. That Richard Perle and William Kristol were his prophets and the Christian right his congregation was our American misfortune. The misreading of the events of 9/11 led to an attack on the wrong enemy for no other reason than the presumed need of a clearly defined enemy to make our liberal democracy strong. This triumph of principle over history initiated a series of contingent events, not only in the Middle East but also in large parts of Asia, that may not be resolved for decades.

Strauss, buffeted by history in his own life, railed against historicism, which holds that meaning can only arise from within a particular historical context. The Straussians contend that historicism leads to relativism and thus to nihilism, finally to the crisis that could bring about the destruction of the American liberal democracy—a crisis, as Strauss himself said, that comes of the loss of the American sense of superiority.

## AFTER ONE COMES NONE

During his lifetime Strauss had a great intellectual antagonist, Sir Isaiah Berlin. They represented the polar opposites of political philosophy, the one and the many, the idealist conservative and the pluralist liberal. To Berlin there was no one true answer to any of the great questions of political philosophy, and if there were true answers we might well never know them. He saw political philosophy, which he described as ethics applied to society, as an attempt to negotiate conflicts among the virtues, none more clear than the conflict between liberty and equality. The Oxford don put it with remarkable clarity: "Liberty for wolves is death to the lambs." The principle

of equality must limit the liberty of the strong if the weak are to be fed and clothed. Berlin agreed with Hegel that the essence of freedom was to be at home in one's own culture. He carefully drew the distinction between relativism and pluralism: "I prefer coffee, you prefer champagne. We have different tastes. There is no more to be said.' That is relativism." Pluralism, he wrote, is "the conception that there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathizing and deriving light from each other, as we derive it from reading Plato or the novels of medieval Japan."

The pluralist wrote, "Ends, moral principles, are many. But not infinitely many: they must be within the human horizon." Strauss had a far narrower horizon, and he believed that there must necessarily be no more than one true and unchanging answer to each of the perennial questions. Nature willed it so. Nature willed everything, even the superiority of the capitalist West over all the rest of the world. The crisis of our time is the failure of the West to believe in its own superiority.

#### THE ANSWER TO THE HUMAN QUESTION IS TO AVOID IT

The Bush Administration has made no credible effort to make peace between Jews and Arabs. It embraces Israel on principle, for Bush is a reader of the Book of Revelation and he believes that Christ will not come again until the Jews have been gathered in the Holy Land and either converted or destroyed. Here Straussians and the President no doubt differ; the wise men merely tolerate their religious allies as the atheist Strauss tolerated religious Jews.

Strauss saw the human question exemplified in the Jewish question. And he believed it had no resolution, for the answer to the Jewish question was assimilation, unless the Jews had a land of their own-and with a land of their own they would be assimilated into the society of nations. The Jewish problem, like the human problem, was insoluble. He offered no exoteric answer. On this subject he quoted Gershom Scholem's work on the Kabbalah, sounding more literary than philosophical, much like Jorge Luis Borges. He spoke of what could not be known, the mystery of the Aleph, the first letter of the Ten Commandments. Had he become a Kabbalist, wrapped in the mystery of revelation? I think not. Straussians have a plan: to usurp the power of revelation in the service of their idea of reason.

## TO BE A NIETZSCHEAN IT IS NOT NECESSARY TO READ NIETZSCHE

In the mind of George Bush, the ancient problem of the conflict between faith and reason found resolution. He learned the comforting character of power. In itself power poses no danger to the country or to the world. Power can be used in constructive or destructive ways, and it can be legitimate or not depending upon its origins. Faith, however, has a poor record in the exercise of power, and the contemplation of the perennial problems has not done much better. The Bush regime relies on faith when it can and reason when it must, not in the cause of peace or justice but in the pursuit of power. In its use of violence and secrecy, the stick and the lie, it has no end in mind but power.

The present American government follows Wohlstetter's last logic and Strauss's esoteric morality. Judging from the number of quotations and references to the philosopher in their writings, the Straussian worldview appears to have come straight from Plato. But the legacy of Strauss fits better with the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche. This may seem curious, because Strauss blamed "the second crisis of modernity" (the crisis of our time) on the author of *Beyond Good and Evil*,

When Strauss wrote about Nietzsche he used the word "public" again and again, perhaps betraying something close to envy. Nietzsche had found the style and the daring to say what lay in the depths of Strauss's soul. Nietzsche's aphoristic love letters to power were the image of Strauss revealed in the aesthetic mirror. Nietzsche ensnared the timid professor who passed on the ideas to his disciples, who whispered them into the all too willing ears of our politicians. Straussian thinking agrees with Nietzsche on historicism and trumpets the master-morality over the slave-morality. The Bush Administration has progressed from Nietzsche's "death of God" to something more subtle, esoteric: the use of God.

No one more than Strauss (and now his followers) has greater contempt for the weakness of humility or puts more credence in the arrogance of the superman. The Straussians say the greatest danger to the United States comes not only from weakness in the face of enemies but also from the failure to believe in its own superiority. It is a theoretical problem, they say. The alternative to superiority is the end of ideals, a descent into the comforts of mere being. Nietzsche called the feckless creature who cares for nothing

more than preservation of his own skin, wishing only comfort and universal equality, "the last man." It was his warning to the world. The only alternative to the last man is the will to power, which Nietzsche said is the will to life itself, the will to overcome, to control, to be master of all things. This is the will of the Bush Administration.

History belongs, Nietzsche wrote, to "the man who fights one great battle," the man who looks to the past only in order to find exemplars, other great figures who attempted to shape the clay of humanity for a "higher purpose." History is filled with such figures, and with nations that to their sorrow put their faith in them. Most of us will not affect history in the role of great men, but in a society administered by men with Nietzschean dreams of power, our task is clear: We must resist.

### **Footnotes**

\* Over the last year or so, some Straussians have made a point of denying their teacher's influence in matters of policy. Aside from the fact that such denials are in perfect keeping with the Straussian approach to public discourse, we need not be concerned with proving direct lines of influence. A brief summary of Straussian doctrine suffices to demonstrate its affinity with what one might call the "mind of the regime," whether any particular member of the Bush Administration has read Strauss or not.

\* The Straussians who advise the Bush Administration have been described as a cabal. Given the results of their combined advice on Iraq, among other things, they would be better described as a ship of fools. Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle head the list. Here are a few more who have served the government: Leon Kass, director of the President's Council on Bioethics; Francis Fukuyama, member of the bioethics council and author of *The End of History and the Last Man*; Gary Schmitt, executive director of the Project for the New American Century; Alan Keyes, former assistant secretary of state; Douglas Feith, undersecretary of defense for policy; Stephen A. Cambone, undersecretary of defense for intelligence; Abraham Shulsky, Defense Department Office of Special Plans; Irving Kristol and William Kristol, journalists and neoconservative entrepreneurs-the father was an adviser to the Reagan Administration, and the son was Dan Quayle's chief of staff.

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