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/Lies of the Neocons: From Leo Strauss to Scooter Libby/

The Philosophy of Mendacity

By JOHN WALSH

All governments lie as I. F. Stone famously observed, but some governments lie more than others. And the neocon Bush regime serves up whoppers as standard fare every day. Why this propensity to lie? There are many reasons, but it is not widely appreciated that the neocons believe in lying /on principle/. It is the "noble" thing for the elite to do, for the "vulgar" masses, the "herd" will become ungovernable without such lies. This is the idea of the "noble lie" practiced with such success and boldness by Scooter Libby and his co-conspirators and concocted by the political "philosopher" Leo Strauss whose teachings lie at the core of the neoconservative outlook and agenda, so much so that they are sometimes called "Leocons."

Leo Strauss (1899-1973) was a Jewish-German émigré from the Nazi regime who eventually landed at the University of Chicago where he developed a following that has achieved enormous prominence in American politics. Among his students were Paul Wolfowitz who has openly acknowledged that he is a follower of Strauss as has the godfather of neoconservatism, Irving Kristol. Irving Kristol begat William Kristol, the director of operation for the DC neocons, editor of the /Weekly Standard/ and "chairman" of the Project for the New American Century, which laid out the plans for the Iraq War. (PNAC also opined in 2000 that a Pearl Harbor-like event would be necessary to take the country to war, and one year later, presto, we had the strange and still mysterious attack of September 11.) For his part Paul Wolfowitz begat Libby, in the intellectual sense, when he taught Libby at Yale. Others stars in the neocon firmament are Richard Perle, Douglas Feith and lesser figures like Abram Shulsky, director of the Pentagon's Office of Special Plans, created by Donald Rumsfeld. Shulsky, also a student of Strauss, was responsible for fabricating the lies masquerading as intelligence that were designed to get the U.S. into the war on Iraq. While the neocons have a passion for the Likud party and Zionism, they also count among their number not a few pre-Vatican II Catholics and an assortment of cranks like Newt Gingrich and John Bolton and crypto fascists like Jeanne Kirkpatrick. The list goes on and Justin Raimondo has documented it in great detail over the years on Antiwar.com. But it is enough to note that Cheney's alter ego was Libby, and Rumsfeld's second in command until recently was Wolfowitz. So both Cheney, the de facto president with an apparently ill perfused cerebrum, and the geezer commanding the Pentagon have been managed by younger and very prominent Straussians for the past five years.

A superb account of the ideas of Strauss, his followers and his influence is to be found in /The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss <<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/140396954X/counterpunchmaga>>/ (hereafter PI) and /Leo Strauss and/ /The American Right/ <<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0312217838/counterpunchmaga>> (hereafter AR), both by Shadia Drury, professor of politics at the

University of Calgary. Her account of Strauss's ideas and the prominence they play in American politics today will give you chills or nausea, perhaps both. As she says in PI (p.xii), "Strauss is the key to understanding the political vision that has inspired the most powerful men in America under George W. Bush. In my view men who are in the grip of Straussian political ideas cannot be trusted with political power in any society, let alone a liberal democracy. This book explains why this is the case." For those who wish to understand the neocon agenda, Drury's books are essential reading. She is clear and thorough.

Of pertinence to "Scooter's" case and the pack of lies he was concealing is Strauss's idea that a "philosopher elite" (i.e., Straussians) must rule. Moreover they must do so covertly. As someone remarked before Last Friday, "Who ever heard of I. Lewis Libby?" a man who shunned the spotlight and operated behind the scenes. The reason for such covert rule, or cabal, is that the "vulgar" herd, as Strauss liked to call the rest of us, cannot appreciate "higher truths" such as the inevitability and necessity of wars in relations between states and even the utility of wars in governing a state. So the covert elite must be certain that myths like religion or the glory of the nation are not weakened for these are among the best ways to rule over the ignorant herd and lead it into war. (Note that the Straussians themselves are not religious. They are "above" religion, capable of dealing with tough truths like man's mortality. But in their view, religion is a crucial factor in governing. Irving Kristol, following Strauss, tells us that religion is "far more important politically" than the Founding Fathers believed and that to rescue America it is necessary "to breathe new life into the older, now largely comatose religious orthodoxies." (AR, p. 148). Any religion will do except perhaps Islam, which is more or less verboten, given the affinity of all leading neocons for Israel. Hence the neocons readily embrace the ideology and leadership of Christian fundamentalism which can keep the crowd under control and get them to march off to war and death. The neocons are mainly interested in foreign policy, as was Strauss, but in exchange for the support of the religious Right in foreign affairs, the neocons line up behind the domestic program of the fundamentalists. It's a win win situation, from their point of view

But useful lies of the grand sort like religious myth or blind nationalism need support by lesser lies at crucial moments. And so we go to the "smaller" lies like "weapons of mass destruction," the "smoking gun that comes in the form of the mushroom cloud." And here too the elite has a role to play. They are to use their "superior rhetorical skills" to make the weak argument seem stronger. In other words the cabal not only has to protect myths and manufacture lies but go to work in selling them. What Strauss called "rhetoric," we call spin.

All of this comes down to one word: lying. But for Strauss, these Lies are necessary for the smooth function of society and triumph of one's own nation in war. Hence for Strauss, the lie becomes "noble." This phrase Strauss borrows and distorts from Plato who meant by a "noble lie" a myth or parable that conveyed an underlying truth about morality or nature. But in Strauss's hands the "noble lie" becomes a way of deceiving the herd. Strauss's "noble lies are far from "noble." They are intended to "dupe the multitude and secure power for a special elite" (AR, p. 79).

One other idea of Strauss's bears on the situation of "Scooter" Libby. How is the Straussian philosophical elite going to get from the halls of academe to the corridors of power? This depends on good luck and the "chance" encounter between the powerful and the Straussian. Here the contemporary neocons go beyond Strauss and leave nothing to chance. It would even appear that they look for the stupid, gullible or those who are mentally compromised. So William Kristol becomes Vice President Quayle's chief of Staff, and Libby becomes the right hand man to the addled Cheney as well as assistant to the Quayle-like Bush. And there are many more.

Finally, Drury makes the point that Strauss and the neocons are not really conservative at all. They are radicals, at war with the entire modern enterprise which makes them turn to the ancients for their inspiration and even there they need to distort the teachings of Socrates or Plato to make their case. But the Enlightenment comes to us with the advance of science to which Strauss is also hostile. He says that he is not against science as such "but popularized science or the diffusion of scientific knowledge. Science must remain the preserve of small minority; it must be kept secret from the common man" (PI, p. 154). But this is impossible. Science by its very nature is a vast social enterprise requiring the widest possible dissemination of its findings. Any society that puts a lid on this will fail, and so by natural selection, the Straussian project is doomed to fail.

But before that happens the Straussians can do a lot of damage. As Drury says, they "cannot be trusted with political power." But we can learn from them the importance of boldness, not in the pursuit of the "noble lie" but of the truth. And we must be certain that we are vigorous as we hunt them down and get them out of power. In that effort Shadia Drury has done us a great service.

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He thanks Gary Leupp a regular on CounterPoint.com for pointing him to Shadia Drury's books.