



Morality & Politics

America's Coup D'État in the Making: Deception and Self-Deception

By Claes G. Ryn

Following Plato, many moralists have associated political virtue with a reluctance to pursue and exercise power. To want to rule others is to be morally disqualified from doing so. The strong tendency in traditional Western political thought to disparage a desire for power has been unfortunate. Without some people governing others, basic social order could not exist, to say nothing of effecting desirable change. The prejudice against power-seeking has left politics too much to people with the wrong kind of ambition, who want to rule as an end in itself.

The reason for observing that the pursuit of power need not be immoral but can be a means to good is that this article will challenge a particular manifestation of the will to power—one that finds expression in increasingly influential arguments for boosting the prerogatives of the American president and the federal government.

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The criticism that will be directed here against that hankering for domination must not be misunderstood as stemming from opposition to any and all efforts to acquire power. What will be rejected is an inordinate and blatantly partisan, and therefore perverse, craving to rule—a dream not just about taking over the U.S. government but about dominating the world. The people who have this desire attempt to conceal its real nature by pretending that it comports well with the thinking of the framers of the U.S. Constitution. It is in fact alien to that thinking. Would that power of a different quality could prevail against it!

A merely self-serving desire for power cannot present itself as such. It must portray itself as a wish to assist others. How best to argue for giving you or your group great power? If you are able to persuade others that the present world is grossly oppressive and destructive of human happiness but that you can make it much better, those others may support mobilizing massive power and placing it in your hands or the hands of people like you. The more ambitious your scheme for benevolent change, the greater the need for power.

Since the French Revolution, ideologies have been exceptionally conducive to power-seeking. Jacobinism, Communism, and National Socialism are alike in promising glorious change and

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assuming the desirability of giving vast power to those who claim to know what needs to be done. A few years ago, David Frum and Richard Perle provided an all-purpose justification for unlimited power: putting “an end to evil”—the title of their co-authored book. Now there is a noble and ambitious goal! Power beyond the dreams of avarice would be needed to realize it. That rooting out evil might be an endless task only increases its appeal to a ravenous will to power. We are, of course, supposed to believe that the connection between advocating sweeping change and needing great power is purely coincidental.

Jacobinism and Marxism were openly revolutionary. They were the ideologies of out-groups challenging existing elites. What this writer has called neo-Jacobinism is the ideology of people on the inside, members of America’s elites, who wish to make the military and other might of the United States a more pliant and powerful tool and who are attempting a creeping coup d’état from within. According to their ideology, America is called by history to create a better world based on universal principles. Virtuous American power must be unleashed. Their main excuse at present for exercising extra-constitutional power is to combat “Terrorism,” but any threat to their great cause is a potential justification for setting the Constitution aside.

The rise of the huge, centralized Federal government and the corresponding decline of limited, decentralized government resulted from changes deep in the American mind and imagination. The new Jacobins take advantage of the fading of the old ethos and hasten its disappearance by advocating notions incompatible with it.

The old American idea of government was indistinguishable from the commandment to “love thy neighbor.” That morality stressed the importance of the person trying to control his own evil and weakness. Strength of will—character—had to be built up so that the person would become capable of more loving familial and local relationships and more responsible citizenship. This morality made for strong communities and self-reliance and minimized the need for government. Alexis de Tocqueville pointed to the great reluctance among Americans in the early 19th century to give up power over their own lives to any distant authority.

The Constitution rested on an unwritten constitution, which was America’s religious, moral, intellectual, cultural, and social habits and beliefs. Traditional America encouraged a strong attachment to life lived up-close. It fostered self-restraint, modesty, respect for law, and a willingness to compromise. It was this heritage that brought into being the constitutional personality. Just as people were in the habit of imposing internal checks on desire, so were they predisposed to accept and respect external constitutional and other legal constraints. Without such people, the Constitution could not work as intended.

But the self-understanding of Americans slowly changed. Throughout the Western world a very different moral ethos was spreading that shifted attention away from intimate associations and local community. It rejected the old notion of original sin and of personal responsibility for people up close. It found morality not in acts of character toward particular individuals—neighbors—but in “idealistic,” sentimental caring for unfortunate collectives and mankind at large. The older personality, which the Constitution both assumed and required, began to wither. Americans started to abdicate authority to benevolent-sounding politicians far away.

Increasingly, doing good became perceived as the responsibility of government, which alone could take on the large projects now said to be demanded by morality. Governmental, collective action gradually replaced individual, private and communal responsibility. The moral momentum behind the old decentralized society weakened. Today strong, centralized Federal power seems to more and more Americans not merely acceptable but desirable. This is so because they are absorbing the anti-traditional moral sensibility now dominant not only in the universities, the arts, the news media, and the entertainment and publishing industries but in many churches. Hence Americans say increasingly to government: “Act for us!”

Much of the intellectual opposition to this trend has been confused and self-defeating. A prime example is the way many conservatives, thinking that they were shoring up traditional beliefs, attached themselves to the ideas of Leo Strauss (1899-1973), whose disciples became a major force in American academia and national politics. A

refugee from Nazi Germany, Strauss taught for many years at the University of Chicago. Because he appeared to defend a classical, ancient notion of universal moral right, many did not notice that he was actually discrediting respect for tradition. Strauss and his disciples advocated an anti-historical, un-conservative notion of moral universality.

According to Strauss, no real philosopher gives any credence to “the conventional” or “the ancestral,” to use his terms. To respect them represents the greatest of all intellectual sins, “historicism.” Inherited ways are, he insisted, mere accidents of history. Respect is owed solely to “the simply right,” which is ahistorical and rational. Strauss sharply criticized Edmund Burke, who saw the possibility of moral universality acquiring historical form. Strauss’s abstract notion of natural right ruled out the idea that a particular tradition might, despite inevitable flaws, embody the quest for moral universality and be, for that reason, worthy of allegiance.

Strauss’s ideas were blithely absorbed by many Christians, not least philosophically unsophisticated and naive Roman Catholics, who perceived him as a defender of moral right. They did not realize that his conception of universality was markedly different from that of Christianity and related philosophical currents. They did not understand or care that in rejecting tradition as a proper source of guidance Strauss was attacking one of the pillars of their faith. They did not comprehend that by sharply separating the universal from the particular Strauss ruled out universality becoming selectively incarnate in history and was striking at the very core of their professed beliefs. Specifically, he was denying the possibility of the Incarnation, of the Word becoming flesh.

Straussian political philosophy has sought to detach Americans from their historically existing tradition of constitutionalism with its deep and distinctive roots in history and to make them loyal instead to abstract principles of Straussian design that have been attributed to the founders. Straussians are not all alike—in a few, the anti-historical prejudice is diluted to some extent by respect for America’s actual past—but prominent disciples of Strauss such as Allan Bloom, Harry Jaffa, and Walter Berns, who differ in some ways, all agree that what is admirable about America is not its concrete, historical self but the abstract principles

of the founders. In the last few decades, Straussian conceptions of Americanism, patriotism and virtue have been widely advocated in academia, including America’s military academies. That terms like these can be given a distinctly anti-traditional meaning has been little noticed.

By propagating a rationalistic, anti-historical notion of moral right Strauss and his disciples have created a deep prejudice against cherishing America’s distinctive, historically evolved Christian and British past. But this was the cultural heritage that nurtured the inner and outer restraints of American constitutionalism. Because Straussian anti-traditionalism has confused and weakened so many who wanted to defend that heritage, it has been in some ways more destructive of it than standard liberal anti-traditionalism.

Despite plentiful ceremonial praise for the Constitution and virtual orgies of constitutional legalism, we are living through the progressive dismantling of America’s proudest political achievement. One sign of the precarious condition of the Constitution is that many imagine that it could be restored by electing more politicians sympathetic to its tenets and by having more “strict constructionists” appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court.

But the old American constitutionalism is inseparable from the moral-spiritual and other culture that gave it birth. Limited government and liberty were made possible by people who, because of who they were, put checks on their appetites, ran their own lives and communities, and behaved more generally in ways conducive to freedom under law. Restoring American constitutionalism would presuppose some kind of resurgence of that old culture. Americans would have to begin viewing life rather differently from how they are viewing it now. They would have to rearrange their priorities and start acting differently, placing more emphasis on family, private groups and local communities. They would have to want to take back much of the power ceded to politicians. Is that likely to happen? If not, the Constitution may not be salvageable.

The time has certainly come to consider what might take the place of American constitutionalism. That so many admirers of the old Constitution are prone to nostalgic dreaming and elaborate defenses of what is long gone is a sign of moral

and intellectual paralysis.

But there are people who have thought for a rather long time about what should replace the Constitution of 1789. They include leading Straussians and neoconservatives who have masked their agenda by pretending to defend what is being lost. It is only fair to add that the strategic designs of secretive and obfuscating leaders are not always obvious to the rank and file.

Straussians and neoconservatives have warned against the consequences of abandoning America's "founding principles," but they are not referring to the ways and beliefs of the founders but to abstractions of their own devising that they falsely attribute to revered historical figures. Those principles are more reminiscent of the French Jacobins than of the founders.

Straussians and neoconservatives have also warned of the consequences of the "closing of the American mind"—the title of Allan Bloom's 1987 best-selling book—but the mind that they want kept open is not the old American mind but what they would have preferred it to be, their own version of the Enlightenment mind.

The same people have warned of American cultural decline, as measured some years back by William Bennett's "cultural indicators," but what they want is not the old American virtues of neighborliness, localism, self-control, compromise, and the rule of law, but the purported virtue of vigorously asserting universal principles in the world. The new Jacobins disdain moral hesitation and ambiguity, demanding what they call "moral clarity." You are either on the side of good, spreading "democracy" or "freedom," as they understand them, or you are siding with the enemy.

The new Jacobins have a double message. On the one hand, they tell Americans that their society is in great danger: It is threatened domestically by fragmentation caused by lack of virtue and patriotism, by moral nihilism, historicism, and multiculturalism. It is threatened from abroad by Terrorism and "Islamofascism." But, on the other hand, the new Jacobins want to be reassuring: Be not afraid! We, the patriotic champions of American principles, are here to protect you! We promise you order and security and an America committed to right in the world.

Their notion of America reveals its alien origins even in strange-sounding language, as in the

name "Department of *Homeland Security*." They are popularizing un-American ideas of governance, notably the so-called "unitary" executive—the notion of the preeminence of the president, who is to be as little constrained as possible by checks and balances and the rule of law. Their goal is wholly at odds with the constitutionalism of the framers.

Lest too many worry about the expansion and centralization of federal power, the neo-Jacobins do not let Americans forget even for a day the great and acute danger of Terrorism. A country that spends almost as much on its military and national security as the rest of the world put together has to tremble continuously before possible threats. People who resist the progressive erosion of American liberties are portrayed as unpatriotic and a threat to national security.

Those who would protect us are advancing the coup from within by teaching us to associate American security and virtue with the leadership of a strong man. Here, as in other ways, Straussian and neoconservative ideas have blended with and hardened standard liberal thinking. In the mid-20th century it was academics like James MacGregor Burns who inspired a cult of the presidency. Burns, who eventually became president of the American Political Science Association, was the quintessential modern American liberal. He advocated popular rule through strong presidential leadership in the Roosevelt-New Deal mode. He knew well that this notion flatly contradicted the framers. They opposed "democracy" and assumed that if any branch of the U.S. government were preeminent, it would be the Congress. Now it is Straussians and neoconservatives who most extol strong executive leadership and more generally muscular federal government. They see the powers of the executive as trumping the powers of the other branches, especially at a time of national emergency. Then the president must embody and express the will of the nation as he sees fit.

Harvard's Harvey Mansfield is the intellectual figurehead of those attempting to justify the creeping coup from within. In *The Wall Street Journal* (May 2, 2007) he has stressed that, now more than ever, America needs a "strong executive." Basing his argument on a strained and transparently unhistorical interpretation of the framers, he contends that the rule of law has drawbacks,

“each of which suggests the need for one-man-rule.” For one thing, the law can produce only what is mediocre, “an average solution even in the best case.” For another, the law lacks “energy.” In a crisis, government must put forth “energy,” and “the best source of energy” is “one man.” What America needs today, Mansfield declares, is “a wise man on the spot” with freedom to act for the whole. To “subordinate” the president to law and the legislature is “dangerous.” Then “he could not do his job.” Not only is a strong executive needed to deal with emergencies, Mansfield contends. It must also be able to overpower domestic opposition, “oppose a majority faction produced by temporary delusions in the people.” Americans admire strong presidents not just in politics but also in corporations, he argues.

If it is suggested that there is a connection between a strong executive and imperialism, Mansfield regards it as better to err on the side of imperialism than isolationism. The difficulties of the war in Iraq arose, he writes, “from having wished to leave too much to the Iraqis, thus from a sense of inhibition rather than imperial ambition.” It seems apposite that Mansfield, the advocate of muscular executive power capable of enforcing its will at home and abroad, should also be a champion of what he calls “manliness,” the topic of his recent book.

The many proponents of the theory of the “unitary” executive include John Yoo, now a professor of law at the University of California, Berkeley. As a Justice Department lawyer in the Bush administration, Yoo, formerly at the American Enterprise Institute, famously defended broadly discretionary presidential power and the use of torture in the war against terrorism. Michael Goldfarb, previously at the *Weekly Standard* and now deputy communications director for the McCain for president campaign, has asserted that the framers “sought an energetic executive with near dictatorial power in pursuing foreign policy and war.”

Voices calling for unleashing allegedly virtuous American power have long been heard in the electronic media, the major newspapers—*Washington Post* and *New York Times* prominent among them—the big news magazines, and the leading opinion periodicals. Long before 9/11 Charles Krauthammer wrote in the *Washington Post* that America must take advantage of being the only

superpower to create a world to its liking. How should it accomplish this goal? “By unapologetic and implacable demonstrations of will” (March 5, 2001). Why should virtuous America not be “implacable”? Robert Kagan wrote in the same newspaper that “America . . . can sometimes seem like a bully on the world stage.” “But really, the 1,200 pound gorilla is an underachiever in the bullying business” (November 3, 2002).

The handwriting is all over the wall. It is becoming clearer with each passing day that neo-Jacobinism and related currents, which may have seemed innocuous and “merely academic” to some, have provided ideological cover for an ever more grasping and ruthless pursuit of power. People of great ambition who want to exercise the power being abdicated by Americans are trying to make us accept and even welcome the final disappearance of American constitutionalism and its culture of modesty and self-restraint.

As already mentioned, some earlier assaults on traditional Western civilization were launched by openly radical agitators who saw themselves as on the outside of their societies. Their justifications for seizing power were revolutionary doctrines like those of Marx and Trotsky. Today’s rolling, gradual coup is engineered by already powerful people who want to consolidate and expand their power. Wishing not to antagonize too much those who still identify with an older America and still wield some power, they try not to appear too radical and so often present themselves as “neo-conservatives” or even “conservatives.” As should be clear from their own words, that does not make them friends of traditional America.

Needless to say, neo-Jacobin ideology, though long a potent force, is not the only way of justifying the coup from within. Those working to centralize power are strongly entrenched in both major parties and in other influential American institutions, and they employ different ideas and symbols to woo and co-opt different constituencies.

Given the growing problems of the United States, why not welcome these efforts to rethink the ways of traditional America? Because they are inspired by highly dubious motives that color the proposals for change. Though those trying to impose a new power structure often speak in the name of America and their rhetoric is sometimes

faintly conservative, they are not inspired by a desire to protect and reconstitute the best of the Western tradition. By changing the meaning of words, they are rather trying to reconcile us to the demise of that heritage and its replacement with their own enlightened and virtuous regime. Their response to the crisis is aggravating the crumbling of the American constitutional order. Their prescriptions contain the outlines of tyranny and must fill the friends of traditional American and Western civilization with trepidation.

What is ominous about these, our purported saviors, to repeat, is not that they want power. It is that they represent a conceited and self-absorbed special interest and have an obsessive desire to rule others—a desire that cannot be concealed by feigned benevolence toward Americans and all mankind. It is necessary to expose their false solutions to what are real problems and to explore by what measures the best of our civilization might, despite daunting odds, be given a new lease on life.