
Who Is Leo Strauss?

*Leo Strauss, Willmoore Kendall, and
the Meaning of Conservatism*

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Since the end of the Cold War, the meaning of conservatism has been the subject of intense debate. This debate has coincided with a revival of interest in the ideas of Leo Strauss, whose political philosophy has influenced American conservatism in particular. Yet the conservative credentials of Strauss have been vigorously questioned, in light of his perceived rejection of history, his apparently unabashed admiration for liberal democracy, and his skepticism about the political value of revealed truth. While I shall show that Strauss is reliably conservative on the issues of history and democracy, I shall also contend that a comparison of Strauss's ideas with those of the American populist conservative Willmoore Kendall reveals that Strauss did not share the conservative enthusiasm for the application of biblical ideas to politics.

*Strauss's
conservatism
questioned.*

What is conservatism? Is it simply an older version of liberalism? Which traditions do conservatives "conserve" in an age of modern change? Is conservatism populist or elitist, democratic or aristocratic? Does it support imperialism or isolationism? Which religion, if any, is most compatible with conservatism? Since the end of the Cold War, these traditionally academic questions have drifted into the political arena and often pitted conservatives (especially in the United States) against each other. To date (2004),

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the American conservative movement's divisions have forced a return to the question of the very meaning of the doctrine.

In the same time period, the ideas of political philosopher Leo Strauss have increasingly become part of this debate over American conservatism. For Strauss and his many students have been credited with (or blamed for) the direction of the conservative movement since the collapse of communism. Some critics on the left have branded Strauss as the major conservative influence on the American intellectual right. One opponent has contended that Strauss is the "godfather" of American neoconservatism, a version of conservatism which has taken hold in American politics since the 1970s.¹ (Indeed, this influence is supposed to be so vast that Straussian ideas have been seen as the guiding foundation of foreign policy under President George W. Bush. Presumably, the planning of the second Gulf War could not have taken place without a nefarious Straussian "clique" in the White House.²) Yet critics on the right have argued that Strauss's influence at the political level does not translate into *conservatism*. Indeed, scholars who consider themselves guardians of the true American conservatism have distinguished this tradition from the ideas of Strauss and his followers.

How exactly do Strauss's ideas compare to American conservatism or even conservatism in general? Despite the fact that his admirers are generally on the political right, can Strauss be called a "conservative" in any sense, American or otherwise? I believe that a comparison of Strauss's ideas with certain premises central to conservatism can elucidate the meaning of his contribution to conservatism in general while shedding light on the meaning of conservatism in particular. Still, such a comparison can be daunting since Strauss himself made no effort to describe himself as a conservative and often criticized the term as too modern for a political philosopher who seeks to transcend modernity in favor of a return to classical political thought. In *Liberalism: Ancient & Mod-*

¹ Shadia B. Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999). For a more sympathetic discussion of the novelty of Strauss's contribution to conservatism, see Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 107-140; Ted V. McAllister, *Revolt Against Modernity: Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, & the Search for a Postliberal Order* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 271-272.

² Cf. Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

ern, Strauss described conservatism as “no longer politically important” since it is “identical with what originally was liberalism.”³ Indeed, his long-time correspondent and fellow political philosopher Eric Voegelin once commented that Strauss “did not [do] the work he did, in order to extend comfort to Conservatives.”⁴ If Strauss, then, disclaimed any association with conservatism, how successful or fruitful can a comparison of his political philosophy with conservatism be?

Any comparison is further complicated by the impression that Strauss, in the eyes of his critics on the right, takes “unconservative” positions on three issues of importance to any conservative political philosopher: the meaning of democracy, history, and revealed truth. I choose these three issues because conservative critics of Strauss usually evaluate his positions on these concerns when assessing his “conservatism.” Increasingly, Strauss has been faulted for being naïvely optimistic (and thus unconservative) about the prospects of liberal democracy in the world. Moreover, Strauss’s battle against historicism has been portrayed as a rejection of history itself (and therefore a rejection of conservative attempts to preserve tradition). Finally, Strauss’s perceived preference for “Athens” or Platonic political philosophy over “Jerusalem” or the Bible has put him at odds with conservatives who wish to preserve the Judeo-Christian heritage of the West.

I believe that the contribution of Strauss to conservatism (perhaps despite his own intent) merits discussion. In particular, I shall argue in this article, against the conservative opponents of Strauss, that his views on democracy and history are quite compatible with conservatism. The last accusation, pertaining to Strauss’s understanding of the relation between Athens and Jerusalem, is more complex and requires more attention, since this relation is the focus of Strauss’s thought. In assessing the implications of Strauss’s views on revealed truth for the conservative cause, I shall contrast the views of Strauss with those of his friend and admirer, the conservative political philosopher Willmoore Kendall. I choose Kendall because his own work made a major

³ Leo Strauss, “Preface,” *Liberalism: Ancient & Modern* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), ix.

⁴ Quoted in Barry Cooper, *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science* (Columbia, Miss.: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 129.

contribution to American conservatism in the post-war period, a contribution which Strauss greatly respected. Kendall made it his life work to define the meaning of conservatism in the United States and insisted that this meaning is inextricably tied to a Judeo-Christian tradition. Consequently, a comparison of Kendall's ideas with Strauss's own views on revealed truth further deepens our understanding of Strauss's status as a conservative.

Strauss and Liberal Democracy

Strauss and his followers blamed for being anti-democratic.

Traditionally, Strauss has been criticized for opposing liberal democracy as a dangerous regime which panders to the worst appetites of human nature. (This destructive pattern is what Strauss witnessed as the tragedy of the Weimar Republic.) Certainly Strauss believed that an "aristocracy" of educated gentlemen within "democratic mass society" is needed to restrain such desires.⁵ Moreover, Strauss's preference for this aristocracy has often raised the suspicions of liberal critics who believe that he opposes democracy altogether. Various opponents on the left have all questioned the depth of Strauss's sympathies with democracy (or at least liberal democracy) because of what they perceive as his unyielding elitist hostility to liberty and equality.⁶ More ominously, Richard Rorty has accused both Strauss and his followers of the revolutionary and undemocratic goal of attempting to "extirpate" the "bourgeoisie as a class or, at least, to root out bourgeois culture."⁷ This critique of Strauss, as the enemy of liberal democracy, has been the conventional one.

Yet in the past few years this argument has been countered by a radically opposite criticism: that Strauss enthusiastically (and wrongly) *supported* the establishment of liberal democracy around

⁵ Strauss, "What is Liberal Education?" in *Liberalism: Ancient & Modern*, 5.

⁶ See Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right*; Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), ch. 3; George Kateb, "The Questionable Influence of Arendt (and Strauss)," in *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: German Emigres and American Political Thought After World War II*, edited by Peter Graf Kielmansegg, Horst Mewes, and Elisabeth Glaser-Schmidt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 29-44; Luc Ferry, *Rights: The New Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns*, translated by Franklin Philip (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 20-21.

⁷ Richard Rorty, "The End of Leninism: Havel and Social Hope," in *Truth And Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 230.

the world. Conservative critics of Strauss have turned the traditional liberal attack upon his work upside down and have argued that, far from intending to undermine liberal democracy, Strauss and his students have advanced this polity as the best regime for all of humanity. Accordingly, this perceived support for liberal democracy strikes conservatives as “unconservative” for its lack of moderation. Paul Gottfried has faulted Strauss and his students for claiming that modern liberal democracy is open and inclusive to all peoples (a position whose liberalism raises suspicions about Strauss’s conservatism). In contrast to the traditionally exclusivist conservative approach to immigration, Gottfried writes:

Strauss and his students faulted for being too democratic.

Another view expressed most forcefully by the followers of Leo Strauss is that the U.S. is a modern democratic republic—one distinct in almost every respect from ancient popular regimes. Ancient republics were indentitarian [sic] and organic, anchoring citizenship in heredity and “long-shared history.” By contrast, modern republics are meant to protect individual material interests and are indeterminately elastic with regard to size and composition. Anyone could or *should* be able to become a citizen of a modern democracy which recognizes a common humanity, while also reducing it to a material common denominator. Unlike ancient or premodern republics, liberal democracy is portrayed as an open vessel receptive to ever-changing social and cultural contents.⁸

Gottfried bases his critique of Strauss entirely on the writings of students who have made these claims. Yet, to my knowledge, Strauss himself never contended that a liberal democracy *should* be inclusive. In fact, as I shall argue below, there is every reason to believe that he lamented this openness of spirit.

In a related vein, Claes Ryn has accused the Straussian camp of following a radical “neo-Jacobin” (or neoconservative) agenda which calls on the United States to force liberal democracy upon all of humanity. The relevant conclusion is that no responsible conservative could ever hold such positions, and therefore Strauss is not a real conservative. While Ryn is careful to make a distinction between what Strauss believed and what his students believe in his name, he nevertheless takes aim at a central premise of Strauss’s philosophy for advancing an unconservative agenda: there is a “clear connection between a Straussian anti-historical, abstract notion of

⁸ Paul Gottfried, “Reconfiguring the Political Landscape,” in *The Paleoconservatives: New Voices of the Old Right*, edited by Joseph Scotchie (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1999), 164 (emphasis added).

natural right and the neo-Jacobin fondness for what it considers universal principles.”⁹ Liberal democracy is the timelessly superior regime, according to this interpretation of Strauss’s ideas.

Since Strauss’s positions on the difference between history and natural right merit a separate section, I shall not discuss them here. Yet it is significant to observe at this point that Gottfried and Ryn agree that Strauss believes in a regime which is liberal and democratic, universally accepting of all, and therefore best for humanity. (Presumably, Strauss is the inspiration behind the agenda that, Ryn contends, constitutes the Bush administration’s policy of imposing this regime upon much of the world.)

Ryn does not cite any text of Strauss which could support this position (although he alludes to students who have made such claims). Moreover, there is substantial reason to doubt that he ever held such a view. It is certainly reasonable to assume that Strauss, a refugee from Nazi Germany, preferred liberal democracy to tyranny. Yet these authors provide no evidence that Strauss himself ever had naïve sentiments about the viability of democracy. (They usually cite the comments of Strauss’s students, who perhaps show more enthusiasm about democracy than the master ever did.) Even a cursory glance at his writings reveals that Strauss was extremely cautious in his hopes for democracy, and certainly never took its survival for granted. In his “Preface to *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*” (1962), Strauss specifically targets the liberal democracy of Weimar Germany for being so open and inclusive in intent that it allowed racist demagogues to discriminate against Jews. The tolerance of private freedom under liberal democracy ironically and tragically threatens the survival of vulnerable minorities: Strauss soberly comments that the liberalism which Weimar represented

stands and falls by the distinction between state and society or by the recognition of a private sphere protected by the law but impervious to the law, with the understanding that, above all, religion as particular religion belongs to the private sphere. As certainly as the liberal state will not “discriminate” against its Jewish citizens, as certainly is it constitutionally unable and even unwilling to prevent “discrimination” against Jews on the part of individuals or groups.¹⁰

⁹ Claes G. Ryn, *America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 32.

¹⁰ Strauss, “Preface to *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*,” in *Liberalism: Ancient & Modern*, 230.

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Given the intrinsic weakness of liberal democracy against the worst impulses of human nature, Strauss believed that this type of regime was incapable of surviving a challenge like that posed by Hitler's National Socialists. The universal freedom and inclusiveness of liberal democracy pave the way for catastrophe. For this reason, Strauss supported the usage of classical ideas (ideas which preceded modern liberalism) in order to shore up this fragile regime. While he offered no comprehensive prescription for the woes of liberal democracy, Strauss believed that liberal education, based on a knowledge of classical political science, can at least encourage a form of excellence that contrasts sharply with mass culture and its demagogic tendencies: "Liberal education is the ladder by which we try to ascend from mass democracy to democracy as originally meant. Liberal education is the necessary endeavor to found an aristocracy within democratic mass society. Liberal education reminds those members of a mass democracy who have ears to hear, of human greatness."¹¹

Strauss favored an educated aristocracy within democratic mass society.

Strauss made it clear throughout his writings that liberal democratic universalism threatens to drown its citizens in mediocrity, with often lethal consequences. In offering a version of freedom undisciplined by education in classical virtue, the citizens of liberal democracy could lash out against the regime itself. The triumph of the "universal homogeneous state," of which Strauss warned in his dialogue with the French Hegelian Alexandre Kojève in *On Tyranny*, reduces any idea of excellence to this fate. This state is the true tyranny which threatens the survival of philosophy through its ideology of egalitarian levelling and mediocrity: only "true men" who embrace the natural inequality of excellence will have the courage to rise up against it.¹²

Therefore, despite the conservative attack on Strauss as a naïve defender of liberal democratic universalism, he relentlessly cautioned that the survival of this regime is not to be taken for granted. The political philosopher must value the freedom of this regime while recognizing its fragility. "We are not permitted to be flatterers of democracy precisely because we are friends and allies

¹¹ Strauss, "What is Liberal Education?" 5.

¹² Strauss, *On Tyranny, Including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence*, edited by Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 209.

of democracy."¹³ Strauss's reluctance to support liberal democracy unconditionally seems no different from the conservatism which Ryn and Gottfried endorse. Despite his liberal critics, Strauss was not an unconditional opponent of liberal democracy. Contrary to his conservative critics, he was not a naïve cheerleader in turn.

Strauss, Historicism, and History

For Strauss, political philosophy must not be an "historical discipline."

Strauss is famous for his unrelenting attack on historicism in the social sciences. Readers familiar with this argument are well aware that Strauss saw in historicism the vulgar modern attempt to bury eternal truth beneath the chaotic and contradictory flux of progress. The overcoming of historicism was essential to the recovery of classical political science. Classical "natural right" supports the eternity of truth (understood Platonically) over the flux of convention and opinion. Historicism dogmatically celebrates the changing and thus valorizes the new and the modern march of progress automatically at the expense of the ancient. Historicism cannot even justify its own existence, since, historically, it is a mirror of its own ephemeral context. Therefore, in order to grasp the permanent things, political philosophy must not be an "historical discipline."¹⁴

Is the philosophy of natural right, then, unconservative in light of the conservative love of history? Conservative critics have argued that Strauss's dislike of historicism amounts to a *rejection of history itself*. Ryn contends that Strauss rejects any claim to credit history with authority, since this contradicts the eternal or ahistorical truth of natural right doctrine. (Indeed, Ryn connects this rejection of history to Strauss's embrace of democracy as the timelessly superior regime for all of humanity, as we have seen.) Gottfried has accused "Strauss and his disciples" of showing no respect for "ancestral custom and the virtue of *pietas*."¹⁵ In attacking not only historicism and traditional conservatives such as Burke, Strauss presumably shows his utter lack of interest in (or

¹³ Strauss, "Liberal Education and Responsibility," in *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern*, 24.

¹⁴ See Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952); "Political Philosophy and History," in *What Is Political Philosophy and Other Studies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), 56-77.

¹⁵ Paul Edward Gottfried, *The Search for Historical Meaning: Hegel and the Post-war American Right* (Dekalb, Ill: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986), 113.

sympathy with) history altogether. In dispensing with “historical consciousness,” Strauss opens the door to an antitraditional conservatism which “he himself might well have deplored,” since it has led to support for flawed regimes such as liberal democracy, on ahistorical grounds.¹⁶ Certainly it is correct that Strauss linked historicism and Burkean conservatism; Burke is thoroughly modern in his rejection of eternal truth while favoring traditional convention.¹⁷

Even some of Strauss’s more sympathetic readers have concluded that Strauss rejected history. Hans-Georg Gadamer suggested that Strauss’s “apotheosis of nature, naturalness and natural law” has led to an “impotently doctrinaire critique of history.”¹⁸ Ted McAllister has claimed that, for Strauss, “History often stands for historicism.”¹⁹ Clearly, Gadamer and McAllister, like Gottfried and Ryn, conflate historicism with history. Yet there is no evidence that Strauss rejected the study or importance of history *tout court*. Strauss was only too painfully aware that history matters, having been raised as an orthodox Jew in an age of persecution. As David Myers has argued, Strauss treated historicism as a threat to everything traditional which conservatives might admire. Since historicism denies the ultimacy of truth, Weimar Jews such as Strauss concluded that historicism may “upend a noble tradition worthy of veneration” such as Judaism.²⁰

Indeed, the most central premise of Strauss’s “esotericism” is that philosophers must be ever mindful of their historical context in order to write with caution about their subject. Socrates, according to Strauss, lacked this caution when he openly questioned the conventions of Athens. The preservation of convention (tradition) is essential for the survival of political philosophy. Strauss was insistent that philosophers be vigilant of their time and live in it accordingly, without openly provoking the powers that be. Philosophers must also begin with the opinions of their time as a

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¹⁶ Gottfried, *The Search for Historical Meaning*, 132-133.

¹⁷ See Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 294-323.

¹⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth And Method* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 490.

¹⁹ Ted V. McAllister, *Revolt Against Modernity: Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, & the Search for a Postliberal Order* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 30.

²⁰ David N. Myers, *Resisting History: Historicism And Its Discontents In German-Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 129.

foundation for dialogue with those who are not philosophically inclined. At the conclusion of *The City And Man*, Strauss sings the praises of historian Fustel de Coulanges for his contribution to understanding the “prephilosophic” city, the real city of necessary convention and traditions which a philosopher must be keen to understand and even appreciate.²¹ Strauss consistently emphasized that Plato, haunted by the fate of his teacher, taught that the true philosopher must conform to the conventions of his regime (while secretly questioning the same among an audience of a wise few). Strauss wrote:

The difference between the way of Socrates and the way of Plato points back to the difference between the attitude of the two men toward the actual cities. The crucial difficulty was created by the political or social status of philosophy: in the nations and cities of Plato’s time, there was no freedom of teaching and of investigation. Socrates was therefore confronted with the alternative, whether he should choose security and life, and thus conform with the false opinions and the wrong way of life of his fellow-citizens, or else non-conformity and death. Socrates chose non-conformity and death. Plato found a solution to the problem posed by the fate of Socrates, in founding the virtuous city in speech: only in that “other city” can man reach his perfection. . . . Plato substituted for it [the way of Socrates] a more *conservative* way of action, namely, the gradual replacement of the accepted opinions by the truth or an approximation to the truth.²²

This awareness of the need to preserve the ways of tradition suggests that Strauss is sufficiently conservative. Indeed, Strauss’s position on the bold speech of Socrates is no different from that of Richard Weaver, a central figure in post-World War II American conservatism. Weaver argued that Socrates mistakenly sought the foundation for politics in “dialectic” or philosophic argument and then concluded that the often irrational conventions of a regime can withstand such scrutiny.

Dialectic, though being rational and intellectual, simply does not heed the imperatives of living, which help give direction to the thought of the man of wisdom. The individual who makes his approach to life through dialectic alone does violence to life through his abstractive process. At the same time he makes himself anti-

²¹ Strauss, *The City And Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 240-241.

²² Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 16-17 (emphasis added).

social because his discriminations are apart from the organic feeling of the community for what goes on. By this analysis the dialectician is only half a wise man and hence something less than a philosopher-king, inasmuch as he leaves out the urgent reality of the real, with which all rulers and judges know they have to deal.²³

Weaver's celebration of "rhetoric," or speech which pays lip-service to the conventions of a polity, is identical to Strauss's defence of Plato's "conservative way." In contrast to his image in the eyes of his critics on the right, Strauss respects the need for ancestral custom and *pietas*. If readers of Strauss identify tradition with convention, then Strauss's views on the preservation of convention sound distinctly conservative.

In advising this vigilant posture, Strauss was far from devaluing history. Yet historicism demands more than such an awareness. Historicism requires utter acceptance of the movement of History, and an embrace of its authority *alone*. The danger of this view, according to Strauss, is that truth becomes a mere image of its time, without any absolute standard on which to build. Ethics then becomes mere convention, politics mere will to power, and slavish acceptance of the novelty of change the standard attitude, as there is no natural foundation left to ground any claims to truth. The true philosophers, according to Strauss, resist their time (albeit cautiously) and thereby transcend it. Historicism, far from conservative, radically threatens what Strauss called "inherited knowledge."²⁴ This attempt to preserve eternal truth amidst the flux of changing opinion seems consistent with conservatism.

For Strauss, historicism requires utter acceptance of the movement of History.

Strauss, Kendall, and Revealed Truth in the American Tradition

The revival of interest in Strauss's ideas has not provoked a comparable revival of attention to the political philosophy of Willmoore Kendall. While his approach to conservatism in the United States sparked heated debate within the conservative movement in his lifetime (1909-1967), his ideas have received little

²³ Richard M. Weaver, *Visions Of Order: The Cultural Crisis of Our Time*, foreword by Russell Kirk (Bryn Mawr: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1995), 64-65.

²⁴ Strauss, "Political Philosophy and History," in *What is Political Philosophy?*, 76-77. As Emil A. Kleinhaus observes, "Strauss was a historian who bridged the gap between history and philosophy by extracting the universal from the particular." See his "Piety, Universality, and History: Leo Strauss on Thucydides," *Humanitas* 14, no. 1 (2001), 95.

notice since his death. The lack of any major study of Kendall's work has been lamented.²⁵ However, there are some indications that scholars are beginning to appreciate at least the relationship between Kendall and his philosophic hero, Strauss. Kendall first encountered Strauss as a peer, not a student, and was already a long-established scholar on the American Founding when he first corresponded with Strauss (in 1949, as an editor for *National Review*). With the recent availability of the correspondence between Strauss and Kendall (spanning almost twenty years), one can observe the great esteem which Strauss held for Kendall. In his letters, Strauss conveyed nothing but the highest praise for Kendall's character and scholarship. In Strauss's view, Kendall was the "best native theorist" of his generation.²⁶ Kendall's praise for Strauss was equally generous. In a review of Strauss's *What is Political Philosophy?* (1959), Kendall called Strauss the greatest teacher since Machiavelli and compared his works to "scripture" for conservatives.²⁷

The philosophical debt which Kendall owed to Strauss has encouraged some readers of Kendall to consider his thought to be a populist version of Straussian ideas, a position whose validity I will assess shortly. Certainly Kendall did not systematically dispute any of Strauss's preconceptions and showed every indication of general sympathy and acceptance. It is also fair to observe that Strauss was more familiar with Kendall than he was with any other prominent American conservative of the post-war period. For these reasons, a comparison of Strauss and Kendall is appropriate.

²⁵ See John E. Alvis, "The Evolution of Willmoore Kendall's Political Thought," in *Willmoore Kendall: Maverick of American Conservatives*, John A. Murley and John E. Alvis, eds. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002), 76.

²⁶ "Willmoore Kendall and Leo Strauss Correspondence," in Murley and Alvis, *Willmoore Kendall*, 237 (letter of May 14, 1961). Strauss also calls Kendall "the only man who vindicates the honour of our profession" (255), the "only man who, without having been my student, understood marvelously what I thought and intended" (258). According to Strauss, Kendall's work on Locke had "no equal" (219).

²⁷ Willmoore Kendall, *The Conservative Affirmation in America* (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1985), 260. In his review of Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958), Kendall comments: "The Strauss revolution in the interpretation of modern political philosophy is the decisive development in modern political philosophy since Machiavelli himself." See *Willmoore Kendall Contra Mundum*, edited by Nellie D. Kendall (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1971), 454.

Nevertheless, at least one caveat is in order. Kendall's conservative credentials often have been as hotly disputed as those of Strauss. Indeed, Kendall has often been portrayed as a figure whose *majoritarian populism* (or faith in the wisdom of the American people to decide the workings of their political system) places him beyond the respectable mainstream of American conservatism. For this reason, Kendall has been labeled an "ultra-conservative" as well as a prophet of the demagogic New Right of the 1970s and 1980s.²⁸ Harry Jaffa, a student of Strauss who debated with Kendall over the meaning of the American Founding, wrote in a posthumous piece on Kendall that his opponent's version of American conservatism was actually a "distinctive American fascism, or national socialism."²⁹ Another student of Strauss, George Anastaplo, has questioned the immoderation of Kendall's attack on liberalism.³⁰ Certainly Kendall's brash style and philosophical love of Rousseau caused unease among traditional conservatives like Russell Kirk.³¹ Even some of his more sympathetic conservative supporters, such as Samuel Francis, have contended that Kendall is more of a utopian than a conservative, since he "exaggerated the counterrevolutionary impulses that the mass of the American people harbor."³²

Kendall's conservative credentials have been as hotly disputed as Strauss's.

One might conclude quite easily that Kendall's populism makes him an odd candidate for a fellow traveler in the Straussian school of political philosophy, given Strauss's aristocratic biases. To be sure, Strauss and Kendall shared conservative positions on the meaning of equality. Their correspondence reveals that both men supported only an "Aristotelian" version of basic equality,

²⁸ See Alan Crawford, *Thunder on the Right: The "New Right" and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 320; Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism In America*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982), 172.

²⁹ Harry V. Jaffa, "Willmoore Kendall: Philosopher of Consensus?," in *American Conservatism and the American Founding* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1984), 198.

³⁰ George Anastaplo, "Willmoore Kendall and Leo Strauss," in Murley and Alvis, *Willmoore Kendall*, 163.

³¹ See George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 245-248.

³² Samuel Francis, "Prophet of the Heartland," in *Beautiful Losers: Essays on the Failure of American Conservatism* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 87.

and in turn thoroughly rejected egalitarian leveling.³³ They also agreed that traditional Burkean conservatism was useless in addressing the problems of modernity.³⁴ Perhaps most significantly, they both concurred that each viable polity has a set of consensual norms which no one—including philosophers—ought to violate with impunity.³⁵

Yet the issue of Kendall's populism remains: just how compatible is it with Strauss's elitism? Kendall was confident that his own understanding of American conservatism—as populist—was the *only* possible conservatism for his nation. The populism of conservatism made it exceptional, and suitable, only for the United States. (For this reason Kendall clashed with opponents of populism such as Russell Kirk.) Yet it is obvious from Strauss's writings that a love of populism is absent. Strauss's own reading of the American Founding recognized the need for aristocratic restraint of the people, even though he doubted that a commercial elite could successfully inculcate virtue among the people.³⁶ (As we have seen, Strauss also doubted that conservatism was any different from liberalism in origin, a thesis that Kendall repudiated throughout his work.)

Students of the relation between Strauss and Kendall are divided over the precise debt that Kendall owed to Strauss. Some have argued that, after considerable exposure to Strauss's ideas in the last fifteen years of his life, Kendall completely abandoned his pure populism and embraced Strauss's own position on the need for restraint of the people's appetites for freedom. John Alvis speculates that, from Strauss, "Kendall could have learned that his majoritarian premises were not only less than self-evident, but, at least from the perspective of an esteemable tradition of great political thinkers, quite evidently false."³⁷ Others have argued that Kendall neatly synthesized Strauss's philosophy with his own. Shadia Drury writes that "Kendall's populism is a Straussian

³³ "Willmoore Kendall and Leo Strauss Correspondence," in Murley and Alvis, *Willmoore Kendall*, 195, 197.

³⁴ See Alvis, "The Evolution of Willmoore Kendall's Political Thought," 58.

³⁵ See Francis, "Prophet of the Heartland," 80.

³⁶ See Strauss's pointed remarks on the rule of lawyers in the Hamiltonian republic in "Liberal Education and Responsibility," in *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern*, 16-17.

³⁷ Alvis, "The Evolution of Willmoore Kendall's Political Thought," 55.

populism that is peppered with a strong elitist element."³⁸ Still others have argued that Kendall only qualified his populism under Strauss's influence. George Nash contends that Kendall eventually offered a "special blend" of populism and elitism, although he always said 'yes' to the people.³⁹ Samuel Francis writes that "only in his last years did he incline to the flirtation that a 'select minority' must keep the people virtuous, and to the natural rights theory put forward by Leo Strauss."⁴⁰

Which of these positions is correct? Did Kendall modify, adulterate, or suspend his populism, based on his exposure to Strauss's ideas? Certainly he warmed to the idea of a select minority guarding ancient republican virtues in his later years: indeed he learned as much from Richard Weaver as he did from Strauss about the need for this minority to keep the people "virtuous."⁴¹ Still, how *deep* was this elitist stance on his part? In essay after essay composed during the period in which he was exposed to Strauss's ideas (1950s-1960s), Kendall shows no sign of a strong belief in elitism. In a polemic attacking the traditional conservatism of Clinton Rossiter, Kendall targeted the "part-time sage of Ithaca" for his belief in aristocracy as necessary to the American polity. Kendall pointedly observed that it was the American tradition to choose the "best men," not to install an aristocratic elite hostile to majorities.⁴² According to Kendall, whatever the elitist pretensions of the Federalists, Madison and Hamilton knew that there was nothing to fear from the popular majority. Indeed, the *Federalist Papers*, as Kendall interpreted them, recognize that the American system of checks and balances restrains unjust majorities, but poses no obstacles "to a widespread popular movement demanding something just."⁴³ In short, while the American republic requires virtuous men who restrain the injustice demanded by the

³⁸ Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right*, 133.

³⁹ Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, 246, 248.

⁴⁰ Francis, "Prophet of the Heartland," 80.

⁴¹ For his debt to Weaver's own version of elitism, see Kendall, "How to Read Richard Weaver: Philosopher of 'We the (Virtuous) People,'" in *Willmoore Kendall Contra Mundum*, 401.

⁴² Kendall, "The Part-Time Sage of Ithaca," in *Willmoore Kendall Contra Mundum*, 63; see also Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, 246.

⁴³ Kendall, "The Two Majorities," in *Willmoore Kendall Contra Mundum*, 218.

majority, nothing can or *should* restrain the justice demanded by the majority.⁴⁴

My reading of Kendall's ideas on the Founding would then suggest that this populist philosopher displayed little support for an elite which restrained the popular majority in general, and therefore at most modified his populism under the influence of Strauss. Still, Kendall's views may not seem entirely incompatible with Strauss's. After all, why would Strauss want the majority restrained if they demand justice? Yet which *type* of justice did Kendall have in mind?

The answer to this question lies in Kendall's understanding of the biblical foundations of America. Indeed, Kendall's populism was deeply rooted in his biblical faith. In the Judeo-Christian heritage of America, Kendall saw the rationale for its politics, as he understood the traditions of his nation. The people can be trusted with authority as long as they retain their faith in God. (This position at least puts Kendall in the mainstream of much American conservative thought.) Indeed the uniqueness of American conservatism lies in this biblical foundation.

Throughout his writings, Kendall contended that the most important issue between American conservatives and liberals is the relation between reason and revelation.⁴⁵ This belief did not commit Kendall to the position that conservatives should opt for a theocracy (a common accusation that liberals level against conservatives) if they are to preserve revealed truth. In a polemic against Russell Kirk's conservatism, Kendall eschewed any attempt to locate a "divine element" in the American polity.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, his last work, *The Basic Symbols Of The American Political Tradition* (which he co-authored with George W. Carey), makes abundantly clear that the overtly Christian principles of the Mayflower Compact (1620) persist as an influence upon the original intent of the American Founding of the late eighteenth century. While it was

⁴⁴ It is significant that Kendall believed in the absolute right of the democratic citizenry of Athens to execute Socrates. See Kendall, "The People Versus Socrates Revisited," in *Willmoore Kendall Contra Mundum*, 149-167.

⁴⁵ Kendall, *The Conservative Affirmation*, 242.

⁴⁶ Kendall, "The Benevolent Sage of Mecosta," in *Willmoore Kendall Contra Mundum*, 47. In *The Conservative Affirmation*, Kendall observes that Judeo-Christian beliefs enjoy a "special status" in America but any attempt to build theocracy is a violation of the American tradition (xxviii).

never the message of America's traditions to identify the legislature with God, it was intended that the people be the guardians and practitioners of Christian virtue.⁴⁷ Kendall sternly warned that the American regime always faces a crisis when the people lose their faith in God and consequently empower themselves with the divine right to transform the world into a utopia. Kendall vividly described this "derailment" of the American order:

For Kendall, American regime dependent on Christian virtue.

God does not exist, but the American people are still the chosen people who must, because God does not exist, build the Promised Land on earth—on earth of course, because earth is the only place where building is possible. . . . America will build a New Jerusalem which will be a commonwealth of free and equal men. If all of this requires remaking human nature, making the unequal to be equal—well, no job is too big for the self-chosen people if it knows its destiny and is determined to achieve it.⁴⁸

America experiences yet another derailment when religious fanatics see the nation as an "arbiter of mankind" and accordingly attempt to build a theocratic "New Jerusalem" on earth, presumably with the sanction of God. In the process, God's "chosen people" force the lion to lay down with the lamb and try to remake human nature.⁴⁹ Yet Kendall is certain that these two versions of the "chosen people" ideology are false representations (and betrayals) of the American Founding and its underlying biblical faith.

Kendall, like Strauss (or any conservative), opposed egalitarian leveling, and attributed the rise of this movement in America (as represented by liberal social engineers) to an erosion of true faith in God, a faith which persisted only if the American people stayed humble with respect to what they could accomplish politically. As long as the people refrain from playing God by attempting to fulfill the impossible dream of equality for all, the American regime will not founder. The people will be virtuous if they remain true to this "Christian picture of man."⁵⁰ (Presumably, an

⁴⁷ Willmoore Kendall and George W. Carey, *The Basic Symbols Of The American Political Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 57, 71.

⁴⁸ Kendall and Carey, *The Basic Symbols*, 152-153.

⁴⁹ Kendall and Carey, *The Basic Symbols*, 153-154.

⁵⁰ Kendall, "How to read Richard Weaver," in *Willmoore Kendall Contra Mundum*, 401. McAllister has argued that Strauss himself held the similar belief that the American natural right tradition would survive as long as Americans still held a Christian perspective, but he provides no extensive evidence that Strauss actually assumed this. See McAllister, *Revolt Against Modernity*, 162.

American Socrates should not openly question this orthodoxy.)

What are Strauss's views on the political implications of revealed truth? Certainly he wrote extensively on the relation between Athens and Jerusalem and gave the impression that he respected both equally. In fact, Strauss went so far as to claim that reason cannot refute revelation.⁵¹ These disclaimers would suggest that Strauss had the deepest respect for revealed truth and that his views are quite compatible with conservative *pietas*. Additionally, the secondary literature that is sympathetic to Strauss's views on revelation has tended to portray him as a respectful and reverent ally of Jerusalem.⁵²

Yet it is significant that some voices on the right have questioned Strauss's sincerity on the question of revealed truth. Frank Meyer, a prominent post-war conservative voice, believed that Strauss and his followers sanctified the ancient *polis* at the expense of the true God.⁵³ George Grant, a Canadian Tory political philosopher who deeply respected Strauss's work, nevertheless suspected that Strauss thought that the "Biblical categories have been in part responsible for a false and therefore dangerous conception of nature" but did not "think it wise to speak openly or forcibly about the matter."⁵⁴ Still others have argued that Strauss rejected the *Christian* embodiment of revelation in particular (although he wrote very little on Christianity). Clark Merrill has contended that Strauss rejected the Christian philosophy of the Middle Ages, based on his views that Christian philosophers repudiate the ancient virtue of prudence in favor of a universal regime whose logic precipitates the rise of modernity.⁵⁵ Does Strauss, then, reject the Christian tradition *in toto*?

Strauss's views on philosophy and revealed truth have inspired a controversial debate on this central aspect of his thinking, but in

⁵¹ See for example Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 75.

⁵² Cf. Kenneth Hart Green, *Jew and Philosopher: The Return to Maimonides in the Jewish Thought of Leo Strauss* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993) and Susan Orr, *Jerusalem and Athens: Reason and Revelation in the Work of Leo Strauss* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995).

⁵³ See Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, 226.

⁵⁴ George Grant, *Technology And Empire: Perspectives On North America* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969), 109.

⁵⁵ Clark A. Merrill, "Leo Strauss's Indictment of Christian Philosophy," *Review of Politics* vol. 62, no. 1 (Winter 2000), 77-105. See also the comments of McAllister, *Revolt Against Modernity*, 198-200.

this article I am simply concerned with the political and specifically conservative implications of his approach. Did Strauss believe that revealed truth is a politically unstable foundation? In his seminal essay "Jerusalem and Athens," which is one of the few works in which he discusses the political implications of the Bible, Strauss gives the impression that the Bible raises hopes that classical political science can never fulfill:

Strauss's views on philosophy and revealed truth have inspired debate.

In the most perfect social order as Socrates sees it, knowledge of the most important things will remain, as it always was, the preserve of the philosophers, i.e., of a very small part of the population. According to the prophets, however, in the Messianic age "the earth shall be full of knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the earth" (Isaiah 11:9), and this will be brought about by God Himself. As a consequence, the Messianic Age will be the age of universal peace : all nations shall come to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, "and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." (Isaiah 2:2-4) The best regime, however, as Socrates envisages it, will animate a single city which as a matter of course will become embroiled in wars with other cities. The cessation of evils that Socrates expects from the establishment of the best regime will not include the cessation of war.⁵⁶

Here Strauss draws a sharp contrast between reason and revelation in a political context. The Socratic regime can never look forward to the end of war as the prophets do. Indeed, as Strauss discussed in *The City and Man*,⁵⁷ ancient regimes depend on a rigid dichotomy between friend and enemy, which then leads to endless wars. The Bible promises an end to this. Can there be, then, a biblically based political regime?

Strauss noted that ancient regimes depended on a rigid dichotomy between friend and enemy.

As I have argued, Strauss occasionally shows doubts about the viability of a biblically grounded regime, especially one committed to universal peace. Would Strauss have agreed with Kendall that belief in the Christian God who limits the agency of humanity will keep the American regime from collapse? While readers will never know exactly where Strauss stood on this issue (since he wrote very little about Christianity), we can surmise that

⁵⁶ Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens," in *Studies In Platonic Political Philosophy*, with an introduction by Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 172.

⁵⁷ Strauss, *The City And Man*, 111.

Strauss was far less confident than Kendall in believing that the people can be virtuous *merely* because of their faith in God.

As we have seen, Kendall was occasionally sympathetic to the idea of an elite guarding the virtue of the people. Yet it is significant that in his last work he stresses that the *people alone*, armed with their faith in God, can keep the republic in good order. Faith, not an elite, is the authentic foundation of America. Strauss's views on the prophetic commitment to permanent peace leave one with the impression that Strauss would have doubted the capacity of the American people on their own to maintain a stable polity, especially if their faith encourages them to seek a radical objective such as the end of war. Kendall himself would have opposed the promise of peace as the "heresy of pacifism"⁵⁸ (and therefore a potential derailment of the American Founding, based on wishes to remake human nature), but there is no indication in his writings that he thought the Bible itself may be the source of radicalism in the American tradition.

Ultimately, the restraining conservatism of the American people was obvious to Kendall in a way that it simply could not be to Strauss. A biblically inspired people may well reconstruct the world radically (through the promise of universal peace), if Strauss is correct. Indeed, the God of the prophets commands such a radical program.

Conclusion

The fate of Socrates, according to Strauss, taught political philosophers to be reverent towards the traditions of their regimes. Readers on the right who accuse Strauss of both valorizing democracy and devaluing history (not simply historicism) forget this important lesson. This reverence, in the modern context, may even require being a friend (but not a flatterer) to the type of regime that condemned Socrates to death. Strauss was always cautious in showing respect to the traditions of his newly adopted nation, which granted him citizenship and provided freedom "to those who care for human excellence,"⁵⁹ while he eschewed grand hopes

⁵⁸ See Kendall, "A Conservative Statement on Christian Pacifism," in *The Conservative Affirmation*, 121-138.

⁵⁹ Strauss, "Liberal Education and Responsibility," 24.

of democratizing the planet. In this respect, Strauss *sounds* conservative.

Yet if his friend and fellow philosopher Willmoore Kendall was correct, the United States was founded on a tradition that, politically speaking, was populist. This populist faith in the wisdom of the American people, informed by Christian revelation rather than classical thought, was the very touchstone of American conservatism. Kendall had no doubts that the American people would exercise their freedoms responsibly and conservatively. Yet Strauss experienced firsthand the nightmarish side of populism in Germany, and he could never have accepted what Kendall called the ideal of the “virtuous people.” While Kendall believed that the people stay prudent and humble as long as they are faithful to the God of the prophets, Strauss doubted whether revealed truth was a stable foundation of the political.

Strauss doubted that revealed truth was a stable foundation for the political.

Conservatism itself, Strauss sometimes cautioned, had radical roots, inaugurating tradition with “discontinuities, revolutions, and sacrileges.”⁶⁰ He never accepted the view that it was anything but the older version of liberalism, a view that Kendall hotly disputed. For Strauss, conservatism was a paradoxical doctrine which claimed to be traditional while acting in a revolutionary manner. The populist conservatism of America may well have reminded Strauss of this fact. Still, in the spirit of Plato, Strauss perhaps knew that it was imprudent to acknowledge this radicalism too openly.

⁶⁰ Strauss, “Preface to *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*,” in *Liberalism: Ancient & Modern*, 253.