
Who Is Leo Strauss?

*Leo Strauss and History:
The Philosopher as Conspirator*

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Those wishing to understand political and intellectual developments in today's America do well to familiarize themselves with the German-American political theorist Leo Strauss (1899-1973), who was a professor at the University of Chicago. Strauss's influence extends far beyond academia, where it has been a major force for a generation. The primary reason why an attempt should be made to understand what Strauss is about is not the intrinsic philosophical importance of his work but that his ideas are influential and provide important insight into the intellectual posture of an increasingly powerful interest in American society. Philosophical figures of the second or third rank sometimes enjoy a time in the sun for transitory historical reasons. They may, for example, serve well the needs of an emerging leadership class. Though not without philosophical interest, Strauss's work merits special attention in today's historical circumstances because of the impact it has had and because of the way in which it expresses and advances extra-philosophical motives.

Strauss's thinking seems in important respects tailor-made for a rising elite that wants, on the one hand, to justify its own claim to power and, on the other, to discredit an older elite that it is trying to replace. This article will examine how Strauss's work helps justify a "regime" change, in the intellectual life especially but also

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in politics and the general culture. This partisan aspect of his thinking is hidden in part behind a concern for the integrity and survival of "philosophy." The latter turns out to be by definition opposed to "convention," that is, to the traditions that prop up an existing elite. Philosophy is threatened by what Strauss calls "historicism," which is, among other things, an inclination to treat history respectfully. It is worthy of special note that Strauss's concern for philosophy and his apparent defense of natural right has made it possible for him to attract a following even among intellectuals who consider themselves traditionalists and who have much to lose by his gaining influence. Unsuspectingly, they have adopted Straussian intellectual habits that undermine their own professed beliefs and advance the rather different ethos of a new elite.

By calling attention to the aspect of Strauss's thought that appeals to the new pretenders to power, this article is not denying that sometimes more philosophical motives help Strauss transcend the partisanship in question. His work is also broader than may appear from the following examination of a particular dimension of his thought.

The Undermining of Traditional Elites

Strauss's own elitism accounts for some of the more conservative-looking elements of his thought; he appears to be arguing for an intellectual and moral aristocracy, an elite far above the *hoi polloi*. His interest in Plato and other Greek figures seems to accord with the classicist emphasis of a traditional Western education, but his classicism and elitism have a special twist that militates in important ways against ideas central to Western civilization. At the same time that Strauss's elitism boosts the self-confidence of an aspiring new elite, it delegitimizes religious, moral, intellectual and cultural traditions distinctive to the old Western world that support the slowly abdicating older elite. Karl Marx is an example of an earlier thinker who sought to justify the overturning of one leadership class and the installing of another, but his ideas appealed primarily to people who felt themselves to be on the outside of their society's ruling circles and were resentfully looking in. To them, it seemed that their interest could be advanced only through the complete destruction of the existing soci-

ety. Leon Trotsky's notion of the global revolution envisioned the worldwide dethronement of traditional elites. Strauss appeals most to individuals who think of themselves as being to some extent already on the inside and as poised to take over from the resigning elite. Because the members of the aspiring leadership class already have great influence in many of society's key institutions, they can even plausibly portray themselves as "conservatives." Though not as hostile to the existing social order as the Marxists, they do not yet feel quite secure in their power and see the need to proceed cautiously, indeed, secretly, in undermining the remnants of the traditions that buttress their main rivals.

Here we find one of the reasons for the attraction of Strauss's celebrated rejection of "historicism." What seems to the superficial reader to be part of a defense of traditional "higher values" actually amounts to a discrediting of those parts of the old Western civilization that stand in the way of the new elite. By making respect for history and "convention" seem philosophically disreputable and even nefarious, Strauss disputes the right of lingering traditional elites to rule. To the extent that he nevertheless manages to appeal to representatives of the old order, he is, in effect, teaching them to despise themselves. To Straussians who are fully alert to the anti-traditional aim of anti-historicism, it is undoubtedly a source of both amusement and contempt that many putative defenders of tradition seem not to suspect what is happening but are happily contributing to the destruction of their own culture.

*Strauss
discredits
tradition.*

There are significant differences between Strauss and typical modern liberal progressive intellectuals, but his work overlaps with theirs in that he will grant no philosophical standing to the traditions supporting the old elites. In spite of disagreements pertaining, for example, to the fact-value distinction and the assessment of classical Greek writers, Strauss and the modern progressives are not as opposed to each other as might first appear. The progressives usually hide a rationalistic elitism of their own behind a professed belief in "democracy," an attitude that is not dissimilar to that of many followers of Strauss. "Democracy" is seen as an effective way of dislodging older elites. In political practice, Straussians often make common cause with mainstream progressives. These affinities are obvious within the so-called "neoconservative" movement, which has numerous Straussians at

its core. Some who are known as neoconservatives do have genuinely conservative traits, but, contrary to its journalistic reputation, the neoconservative movement is in its main political-intellectual thrust a special, ideologically intense form of modern American progressive liberalism, as this author has shown in *America the Virtuous*.¹ Neoconservatism differs from some other types of modern liberalism in that it presents itself as promoting universally valid moral principles. It asserts its own alleged nobility in highly moralistic ways and sees itself as fighting evil in the world. The neoconservative case for a powerful federal government differs from that of mainstream liberalism in that such government is believed to be necessary for fulfilling America's "virtuous" global mission. Strauss and his disciples provide the new pretenders to elite status with a source of righteousness. Needless to say, mainstream liberal progressivism has its own brand of moralism, though one derived more from Rousseauistic humanitarianism than from Plato. It is no coincidence that Straussians typically see Plato and Rousseau as sharing much common ground, notably that the two side with "nature" against "convention."

A Philosophy of Concealment

Much of Strauss's writing is about the practice of and need for surreptitious philosophical argumentation. He contends that the philosopher needs to conceal his true motives from the powers-that-be. Strauss's voice is that of a conspirator. It has great appeal to intellectuals who define themselves in opposition to traditional Western elites and are trying to manipulate them for their own purposes. In an allusion to John Le Carré's behind-the-scenes spymaster, one of Strauss's most devoted admirers, Abraham Shulsky, has called Strauss "the George Smiley of political philosophy." As a high civilian official in the Pentagon, Shulsky formed part of the neoconservative network that built and promoted the case for war against Iraq.

Many of those who have enlisted, if only in a subsidiary capacity, in the effort to destroy "historicism" and promote "philosophy" are strangely unaware that it threatens their own supposedly

¹ *America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2003).

most fundamental beliefs. The current debilitated and confused state of Western intellectual life and a limited, spotty education have made them vulnerable to the kind of dissimulation that Strauss not only recommends but practices. Straussians who think of themselves as defending “Western civilization,” specifically Christianity, have been enticed by Strauss’s interest in classical philosophy, by his rejection of the modern fact-value distinction and by his apparently making a case for universal right. His critique of “historicism” has seemed to them a reassuring attack on moral relativism and nihilism. Non-philosophical considerations have inclined them in the same direction: they have sensed that in aligning themselves with Straussianism they are associating themselves with a powerful new interest and can hope to reap financial and career advantages.

Strauss’s influence on neoconservatism finally began to attract public attention when journalists and others started tracing the influences behind the campaign for war against Iraq. Much of the interest focused on the fact that Strauss and the Straussians had long advocated political deceit. These features of Straussianism could plausibly be said to have been put to use in the effort to get the United States into war. The Straussians are known for having cultivated a cliquish attitude of moral and intellectual superiority. Only they possess genuine insight, which means, among other things, that they see right through widely but uncritically held conventional beliefs. They consider their own philosophical truths to be wholly beyond the grasp of ordinary people and to be disturbing to them. Even intellectuals who are not initiated members of the Straussian circle are unable to understand what those truly on the inside are able to understand. Because the philosophers’ insights pose a threat to the established order, they must hide them and feign holding opinions less offensive to the conventions of the society in which they live. To avoid the resentment of the surrounding society and be able to insert themselves into the counsels of the powerful, the philosophers must use deceit. Once in a position of influence, they can advance their own objectives by whispering in the ear of the rulers.

*Strauss
counsels
deceit.*

The mind-set fostered by the George Smiley of political philosophy does throw light on the conduct of key proponents of the war in Iraq and of American global supremacy. It brings into the open the conspiratorial dimension of Straussianism. What is of

primary concern in the present discussion of Strauss's view of history and convention, however, is a more subtle, more philosophical form of subversion. What needs to be better understood is the deeply anti-conservative dimension of Strauss's view of universality and history.

For Strauss, to respect tradition is anti-philosophical.

Strauss's thought subverts loyalty to the "ancestral" and traditions of all sorts. To accord anything philosophical respect because it is old, Strauss asserts, is to abjure philosophy. To stress the historical nature of human existence and the importance of heeding historical experience and circumstance is to be a "historicist" and to foster value-relativism or nihilism. The true philosopher is not interested in historical particularity but in universality. Strauss's thinking creates a deep prejudice against taking tradition seriously. It discredits the conservative habit of looking to long-established human practices and beliefs as guides to life's higher values.

Ahistorical Universality

Strauss's way of dealing with the problem of history indicates that some of the most important ideas of modern philosophy are largely unknown to him. He does not recognize that the philosophy of historical consciousness or the historical sense has far greater range and depth than anything indicated by his term "historicism." The latter conception may describe some historicist tendencies but ignores elements of the larger current of historicism that have contributed greatly to an improved understanding of the age-old question of the relation between universality and particularity. Strauss exhibits a strange philosophical myopia that requires an explanation. To the extent that he touches upon the more fruitful forms of historicism at all, he analyzes them by means of his reductionist construct "historicism," which precludes attention to the philosophically crucial idea of *synthesis*. That term refers in the present context to the possible union of universality and historical particularity. This idea seems not to have registered in Strauss's mind. He is unable to formulate it even as a preliminary to trying to refute it. One may hypothesize that he was disinclined seriously to explore the possibility of synthesis because he intuited that such a notion would undermine his assertion that philosophy and convention must clash. To grant that anything his-

torical might have authority would risk according convention respectability, which would be to weaken the claims of an anti-traditional elite. Whatever the reasons why Strauss ignores the idea of synthesis, his notion of historicism is a straw-man, a caricature of little use in philosophical discussion.

It should be said in Strauss's defense that at times the limitations of his own conception of the problem of universality and particularity bother him. He reaches, however tentatively and inconsistently, for a way of reconciling universality with the needs of time and place. He might even be said to be groping for a historicism of his own, a position that he thinks of as a modified moral absolutism or a modified moral relativism. This author has written elsewhere on this feature of Strauss's thought.² Though the careless reader might not catch it, Strauss is even willing, when considering the actions of a political entity that he can unreservedly embrace, to accept Machiavellian methods. He goes so far as to suggest that "there are no universally valid rules of action."³ It appears that, for Strauss, Machiavellian methods are forbidden to ordinary societies but permissible to an extraordinary political entity with which he can identify.

Partisan agenda often key to Strauss's meaning.

Much of what is confusing, ambiguous and contradictory in Strauss is due not so much to the philosophical difficulties he encounters as to the fact that his partisan agenda is never far from his mind. He shifts his emphasis and gives different impressions depending on his objectives at the moment, saying one thing to insiders who know his secret and another to those whose traditions he would like to see weakened. Strauss and the Straussians distinguish between "exoteric" and "esoteric" writing. The former is directed to the uninitiated reader and may present ingratiating opinion rather than the writer's real beliefs. "Esoteric" writing, which is directed only to the insider or potential insider, contains

² See Claes G. Ryn, "History and the Moral Order," in Francis Canavan, ed., *The Ethical Dimension of Political Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1983). See also my critique of Strauss's ahistorical epistemology in chapter 7 of *Will, Imagination and Reason*, 2nd exp. ed. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997), which demonstrates a deep ambivalence in Strauss regarding ultimate truth. Strauss's hesitation in this area shows his failure to do justice to historicism but also gives evidence of a genuinely philosophical desire to overcome the limitations of his own accustomed view of the relationship of universality and particularity.

³ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 162.

the writer's innermost views, which are formulated obliquely, "between the lines." Though these views may be more transparent than Straussian insiders imagine, they are supposed to be kept hidden because they may be seen by people in the surrounding society as offensive or threatening.

*Machiavellian
methods
permissible to
special society?*

Strauss seems most of the time to be categorically opposed to "historicism" and to insist that "convention" is inimical to philosophy, but the implied context for these arguments is his need to deal with a society that he cannot embrace, one that the philosophers cannot dominate and whose traditions are therefore regarded as incompatible with natural right. His critique of "historicism" and "convention" serves to undermine the elite of that kind of society, enabling the philosophers to pursue their aim in greater safety. At times, however, Strauss seems to adopt the point of view of a society or political entity quite out of the ordinary, one in which philosophers can rule and in which he can feel really at home. One gets the impression that for this particular society it would be not only acceptable but desirable to *cultivate* convention and to resist alien influences. Might not this special power even legitimately use "historicist" Machiavellian methods to advance its interests? Those who know that Strauss has called Machiavelli a "devil" and a teacher of "evil" will perhaps be astounded by such a consideration, and yet it is Strauss who, right in *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, hints at the possibility of just this kind of use of Machiavellian methods. He refers to what he labels a "profound theological truth"—that "the devil is a fallen angel"—and writes that Machiavelli's thought has "a perverted nobility of a very high order." "*Of a very high order.*" If put to use by the right power, what would such nobility be, if not a force for good?⁴

To look in Strauss's work for a philosophically coherent position rather than for theorizing shot through with partisan argumentation may strike some as attempting the impossible, but here the emphasis will remain on what appears to be the more genuinely philosophical basis of his work. This is not to deny the difficulty of disentangling philosophical reasoning in Strauss from suppositions advancing undeclared partisan motives. In fact, it is the contention of this article that even his more strictly philosophi-

⁴ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 13.

cal ideas are biased by extra-philosophical considerations and objectives.

There is in Strauss, in addition to the partisan, a real philosopher struggling to free himself of inadequate conceptions. With regard to the subject of universality and history, it is to his credit that he should at times doubt his own rather strained, ahistorical conception of universality and the "simply right." In a part of himself, Strauss dimly recognizes that the issue could not be as simple as he usually makes it out to be. He becomes embroiled in a philosophical struggle with himself but is not able to move beyond the deep ambivalence about universality that characterizes his thinking. It is partly this wavering that has made many of his readers, including some of his strongest admirers, doubt his belief in universality. It has been suggested that his apparent advocacy of natural right is intended to fool potential allies and that he is really a moral nihilist in disguise. Others point out that Strauss is contradictory on this issue because he has a different message for different audiences. An alternative view, which does not deny the element of truth in the mentioned interpretations but gives more credit to Strauss as a philosopher, is that he does not in the end quite know his own mind and is trying, without much success, to reconcile opposing ideas. He does not realize, or does not want really to consider, that the philosophical problem with which he is struggling had been addressed in depth by others and largely solved long ago.

Strauss's philosophical predicament, as distinguished from contradictions generated by the clash of his partisan dissimulation with his philosophizing, is due precisely to his not recognizing the possibility of synthesis between universality and historical particularity, or, to use his own preferred term, "individuality." Strauss sees the issue as pitting universality, affirmed by his beloved "ancients," against "individuality," which is championed by the "moderns." He writes, "The quarrel between the ancients and the moderns concerns . . . the status of 'individuality.'" To give prominence to individuality, that is, to historical particularity, is to forsake philosophy, to side "not with the permanent and universal but with the variable and the unique." It is to abandon "universal norms."⁵ A choice must be made between universality or

Possibility of synthesis of universality and particularity not recognized.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 323, 18, 14.

history. Strauss never considers a third possibility. *Tertium datur.*

The ignored possibility is that of allowing for historically concretized universality, individuality that embodies universality. To one with Strauss's philosophical predisposition such a possibility must appear a contradiction in terms, for the universal and the particular are by definition separate. Even so, he occasionally catches at least a glimpse of the need for something like synthesis. Unfortunately, his accustomed intellectual habits sooner or later reassert themselves and quash the glimpse. It seems to him that if universality were somehow to blend with or adapt to the historical, universality would be absorbed into the changeable, the meaningless flux, and would dissolve in chaotic individuality. His brand of Platonism closes him off to another possibility.

*Strauss
wavers
between
nihilism and
abstract
universalism.*

Strauss is a rationalist and regards Truth with a capital "T" as the essence of universality. He is at the same time sufficiently a philosopher to recognize that philosophy does not ever arrive at final, definitive answers to its questions; it must keep addressing them. Because of the elusiveness of Truth, Strauss is tempted to doubt the existence of universality, and he flirts with nihilism. What he does not see is that it is only his own abstract, reified, ahistorical conception of universality that is threatened by a failure to reach the ultimate Truth. He might have considered that it is possible to know the universal without having unobstructed, complete access to it, that is, both to know and not know the universal at the same time—to know it imperfectly, as a human being would—but he conceives of universality and individuality in such a way as to leave him undecided as between positions that seem to him, in the end, equally unsatisfying: a belief in abstract universality on the one side and nihilism on the other. To reconstitute the idea of universality in a way that takes account of the dynamic-dialectical nature of human life and that recognizes a kind of give-and-take between universality and history is beyond him. Not having the possibility of synthesis available to him, he is philosophically at a loss.

*Disciples
magnify
Strauss's
mistakes.*

Instead of breaking out of the philosophical bind in which the Master has left them, Strauss's disciples typically magnify his philosophical mistakes and weaknesses, making him appear even less sophisticated on the issue of universality and history than he is. In its politically and intellectually prevalent forms rather than in the master's own version, Straussianism has been prone to

rather crude ideologizing. Strauss and the Straussians have been a major influence on neoconservatism, many of whose representatives have been strongly drawn to neo-Jacobinism, a subject that is discussed in depth in *America the Virtuous*. Like the old Jacobins, the new Jacobins are ardent advocates of allegedly universal principles. Strauss cannot be blamed for all the uses to which his thinking has been put, but his advocacy of ahistorical natural right, even if it should be disingenuous, and his critique of historicism have helped shape neo-Jacobin ideology. He has provided, among other things, a moral supplement to such other intellectual influences on neo-Jacobinism as the Trotskyite notion of global revolution, anti-communist social democracy *à la* Sydney Hook, and progressive, “democratic” capitalism—influences that have in common a rejection of traditional social order or, to use Strauss’s term, “the conventional.”

Convention: the Enemy of Philosophy and Nature

Much can be learned from Strauss’s treatment of Edmund Burke. His way of dealing with him shows his inability to handle a form of historicism that bears little resemblance to his bogeyman “historicism.” His account of Burke is philosophically clumsy and careless, indeed, in some respects even dishonest.⁶ In Strauss’s philosophical universe, we have a choice between respecting philosophy and respecting history. Never the twain shall meet. As Burke accords respect to history and convention, he is to Strauss *ipso facto* an enemy of universality, of “natural right.” Burkean historicism, it seems to him, prepares the way for philosophical and political disasters to come.

*Strauss
misconstrues
Burke.*

Strauss sees Burke’s “historicism” as a threat to the pursuit of universality, a task that Strauss himself narrowly and rationalistically assigns to “philosophy.” What is actually the case? Burke defends what he calls “the general bank and capital of nations and of ages,” that is, the ancient and slowly accumulating experience and insights of humanity.⁷ Burke defends this heritage not as a de-

⁶ For a discussion of the shortcomings of Strauss’s interpretation of Burke that also demonstrates his carelessness as a scholar and his seemingly deliberate distortions, see Joseph Baldacchino, “The Value-Centered Historicism of Edmund Burke,” *Modern Age*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Spring 1983).

⁷ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 76.

finitive, ultimate standard of good but as a necessary support for frail human beings. Without the evolved beliefs of the human race we would have to fall back on nothing more than our meager resources as individuals. The latter are, Burke argues, wholly insufficient for a satisfactory life. The individual tends to be foolish but the species wise. It is partly because rationalists will not heed the lessons of humanity's past that they are unaware of the limits of human ratiocination.

*Philosophy
ahistorical,
Strauss
asserts.*

For Strauss, Burke's desire to be guided by the past and to carry forward the best of a heritage is a sign that he is abandoning the universal. According to Strauss, "the ancestral" deserves no intellectual deference. It is the product not of reflection but of historical accident. To philosophize means "to transcend all human traditions." Only the philosopher's insight into ahistorical natural right is worthy of respect. History as such has nothing to contribute to enlightenment. It is, as Plato believed, a flux devoid of meaning. Philosophical questions are, Strauss insists, "fundamentally different" from historical questions.

Strauss severely chastises Burke for not believing that the best political regime is formed according to a universal model, what Strauss calls the "simply right," as discerned by an outstandingly wise person, a philosophical "lawgiver." Instead Burke believes that a good society can emerge only historically, over time, by building on the best from its own past. Strauss dismisses this view as "historicism," as neglecting what is intrinsically right. "Historicism," he asserts, "rejects the question of the good society, that is to say, of *the* good society."⁸

Strauss is correct that Burke does not accept the notion of a single model of political right, but he is wholly mistaken in assuming that Burke therefore undermines or abandons the notion of moral universality. Burke emphatically affirms it. What he does reject is the belief that moral-political right can be summed up once and for all in a particular abstract formula. Universality must be served differently in different historical circumstances. The notion of a universal model is, he believes, both superficial and arrogant and hides a desire to dominate others. This is the kind of thinking that Burke sees fueling the French Revolution, and he

⁸ Leo Strauss, "What is Political Philosophy?," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (1957), 360, 355. See also Strauss's criticisms of Burke in the chapter on "The Crisis of Modern Natural Right" in *Natural Right and History*.

passionately opposes it. All societies should aspire to moral and other good, Burke believes, but in trying to realize higher values the particular society needs to adapt to its historical situation and needs the guidance and support of what is most admirable in its own traditions.

Strauss, in contrast, presents tradition and universality as inherently opposed to each other. "The recognition of universal principles . . . tends to prevent men from wholeheartedly identifying themselves with, or accepting, the social order that fate has allotted to them. It tends to *alienate* them from their place on the earth."⁹ Strauss's picture of the philosopher is that of a homeless, alienated person, whose attachment to the society in which he dwells is tenuous at best. Universal principles, the paramount concern of the philosopher, do by their very nature separate him from particular traditions. Hence a person standing, for example, in the Christian tradition must, if he is to be a real philosopher, loosen or give up his attachment to that heritage.

That so many Christian intellectuals, particularly Roman Catholics, have incorporated Straussian anti-historicism into their thinking is indicative of philosophical poverty as well as gullibility, not to say suicidal tendencies. These Christians appear not to take very seriously that, in addition to Scripture and reason, mainstream Christianity has cited *tradition* as one of its pillars. Or perhaps these intellectuals simply have not understood that Strauss's attack upon "historicism" is, among other things, an attack upon tradition. Many Thomistically inclined thinkers seem not even to have noticed that Strauss's disparagement of convention as incompatible with philosophy runs counter to the close connection seen by Aquinas between natural law and custom. Aquinas writes that "if something is done a number of times it seems to be the result of a deliberate rational decision." He senses that the authority of long-standing custom has something to do with its both contributing to and being informed by reason.¹⁰ Though Thomas is far

Many Christian intellectuals unaware of implications of Straussian anti-historicism.

⁹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 13-14 (emphasis added). For a critique of anti-historicism and an argument for the potential synthesis of historical particularity and universality, see Claes G. Ryn, *A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World* (Columbia and London: The University of Missouri Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *St. Thomas Aquinas on Politics and Ethics*, transl. and ed. Paul Sigmund (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), *Summa Theologica* Qu. 97, 57.

from having Burke's more consciously historical awareness, his notion of natural law is quite different from Strauss's ahistorical conception of natural right, which helps explain Strauss's barely concealed disdain for Thomas as a philosopher in *Natural Right and History*. Thomas is not so much a philosopher, Strauss says, as one codifying Christian belief and practice. Thomas's notion of natural law, says Strauss, is "practically inseparable not only from natural theology—i.e., from a natural theology which is, in fact, based on belief in biblical revelation—but even from revealed theology."¹¹

*Straussian
ahistoricism
incompatible
with idea of
incarnation.*

A point of wider philosophical interest is that many Christians seem not to realize that to accept the Straussian ahistorical notions of philosophy and right is to accept the proposition that synthesis between the universal and the historical is impossible. But to accept such an idea is, among other things, to reject the central Christian idea of incarnation, the possibility of the "Word" becoming "flesh." Only lack of philosophical sophistication and discernment could have made so many Christians receptive to a doctrine that strikes at the heart of their own professed beliefs. Some Christian thinkers, including Thomists who are today slowly awakening to Straussianism's being in some ways problematic, seem to imagine that as long as they hold to their traditional religious beliefs and practices their Straussian intellectual habits will not do any harm. But to retain the habits of ahistoricism is to contribute to the erosion of Christian intellectual culture as well as to close off access to some of the most important philosophical advances in human history.

Abstract Universalism vs. Synthesis

The above comments about Christian naiveté are not meant to imply that the idea of incarnation is an exclusively Christian concern. The idea of synthesis, which is integral to the idea of incarnation, is central to any adequate philosophy of human existence. Without it, the dynamic-dialectical nature of life and the interaction and cooperation of universality and particularity must be poorly understood. It can be argued that good historicist philosophy, which applies to all of life, has deepened and explained more fully the implications of the Christian understanding of the Incarnation. Such philosophy has demonstrated most generally that

¹¹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 164.

universality enters human experience only in some concrete shape. Not only in the mentioned religious context but wherever the good, the true and the beautiful come into being, there is synthesis between the universal and the historical particular. To recognize this fact is fully compatible with recognizing what is equally important to understand, that particularity/individuality is frequently in sharp conflict with universality. As divorced from universality, particularity becomes the material for evil, ugliness and falsehood. Still, the particular is not, as Plato and Strauss would have it, necessarily a detriment to universality. In the world known to human beings, it is, on the contrary, *indispensable* to the realization of the universal. Far from inevitably being enemies, universality and particularity positively need each other. Whenever goodness, truth and beauty are realized, universality and particularity are mutually implicated in each other. Universality manifests itself *through* the particular. This synthesis does of course shun particularity incompatible with itself, but, to become itself, universality requires its own kind of particularity. The more adequate the concrete instantiation, the more profound the awareness of universality that it yields. Universality is transcendent in the sense that none of its particular manifestations exhausts its inspiring value, but without historical particularity universality also is not a living reality, but is only an empty theoretical abstraction created by ahistorical reasoning.

*Good, true
and beautiful
are embodied
universals.*

It is not possible here to explain fully the notion of synthesis being employed in this discussion of Strauss. The author of this article asks the reader to consult his book *A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World* (2003).¹² It sets forth a philosophy of value-centered historicism and explains the special sense in which universality and particularity are not only compatible but may become one and the same. The book shows why an ahistorical conception of universality is not only false to the phenomenological facts of human experience but is a temptation to ideological reification and political tyranny.

Besides a record of human depravity, ignorance and foibles, history gives us a record of embodied universality. To the extent that the latter record is transmitted to new generations and comes

¹² See also Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason*, which examines the moral, intellectual and aesthetical dimensions of synthesis and how they interact.

to imbue their experience, it helps broaden and deepen life, make it worth living. Burke sees in this elevating pattern of human striving the hand of Providence. God moves in history. The philosopher need not understand this higher movement in a Christian or other doctrinally specific fashion to realize that without the historical manifestations of universality human existence would be morally, philosophically and aesthetically impoverished. Without them, the man of moral, intellectual and aesthetical sensibility who is trying to articulate his own groping sense of universality would be at a crippling disadvantage. The more he has been able to make the particular historical manifestations of universality his own, the greater his ability to discern and express the universal for himself. The living, experiential reality of these particulars helps hone his higher sensibilities. It helps him to weed out of tradition inferior and perverse products of history and to identify and resist forces in the present that threaten the higher potentialities of human existence.

*Precedents
assist the
articulation of
universality.*

Differently put, the sense of the universal can be articulated and strengthened by what it finds upon intimate examination to be consistent with itself in the past. The universal recognizes itself, as it were, in what is best and noblest in the historical record. These precedents help give it concreteness and direction and inspire new manifestations of the universal. Without the best of the human heritage to stir and challenge his will, imagination and reason, man's sense of the universal lacks guidance and can easily be distorted by the idiosyncracies and limitations of time and place and of particular individuals and groups. At a time when the human heritage is neglected or positively scorned, man's sense of higher good has to find its direction in circumstances of moral, aesthetical and philosophical perversity or chaos. This is why transmitting the best of the civilized heritage—respecting tradition in the Burkean sense—is indispensable to the continuing articulation of man's sense of the universal.

An acute awareness of the historicity of human existence and of our dependence on previous generations is, then, not, as Strauss would like us to believe, the enemy of universality. The historical consciousness is the all-important ally of philosophy and of universality in general. It is indistinguishable from the direct, immediate, experiential apprehension of universality and from its continual adaptation to changing circumstances.

Granted that narrow-minded, provincial convention can pose a threat to truth, why is it so important for Strauss to base so much of his thinking on the assumption that philosophy and convention must clash? Why must no room be left for the possibility that healthy tradition may become the ally of philosophy and vice versa? Joseph Cropsey—a leading Straussian, who was Strauss's student at the University of Chicago, taught in the same department, and co-edited a book with Strauss—has given stark expression to the sharp dichotomy between nature and convention upon which Straussians insist. "The conventional," says Cropsey, "is *antithetical* to the natural." It is "contrary *in its essence*" to what reason finds in nature.¹³

So radical and seemingly forced is this dichotomy between philosophy and history that one has to suspect that its origins are mainly non-philosophical. The dichotomy seems to have more to do with a felt need to discredit tradition, presumably to advance a partisan interest. It might be said that Strauss and the Straussians are simply following the pattern set by Plato, who also taught disdain of what he thought of as history. But Strauss is presenting his arguments more than two millennia after Plato, and in the wake of philosophical developments that can only make the adoption of a Platonic conception of the relation of history and universality appear to the philosophically educated to be archaic and far-fetched. Strauss is also more radically anti-historical than any ancient Greek could have been. It might be retorted that Strauss and the Straussians are not alone today in ignoring centuries of philosophical development, but this means merely that the question of extra-philosophical motives must be raised with regard to others as well. It is not uncommon in intellectual history for groups to avoid facing up to profound philosophical challenges to themselves by acting as if nothing had really happened and by hiding behind some old, more pleasing figure who is accorded the status of unimpeachable authority and is interpreted as representing just what the group thinks he should represent. This is philosophical evasion, group partisanship intensified by intellectual insecurity, for which the particular group pays a high price in the long run. Strauss's exaltation of Plato, as he chooses to interpret him, would appear to be in large measure an example

Strauss more radically anti-historical than ancient Greeks.

¹³ Joseph Cropsey, *Political Philosophy and the Issues of Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 117-118 (emphasis added).

*Idea of
synthesis
unfamiliar
to many
American
conservatives.*

of such evasion, however helpful it may be in discrediting tradition and dislodging corresponding elites.

Though not a philosopher in the more narrow, "technical" sense, Burke sees deeply into the connection between history and universality. Other philosophically more systematic and conceptually precise minds, including Hegel in the nineteenth and Benedetto Croce in the twentieth century, have, in spite of philosophical weaknesses of their own, provided a more penetrating account of what Burke understood more intuitively. One of the weaknesses of modern American intellectual conservatism has been its failure fully to absorb the historical consciousness that gave rise to and gave distinctiveness to modern conservatism. A certain resistance in the Anglo-American world to philosophy above a certain level of difficulty helps explain this problem. One finds, for example, in a thinker like Richard M. Weaver a failure similar to Strauss's to grasp the possibility of synthesis between universality and the particulars of history. To be sure, that deficiency does not make Weaver as unfriendly as Strauss towards tradition, but, although Weaver himself may not recognize it, it does give tradition a philosophically precarious existence. The absence in Weaver's thought of the idea of synthesis makes him see the need for a choice between "imitating a transcendent model," which is to him the appropriate stance, and giving prominence to individuality. What will invest life with meaning is "the imposition of this ideational pattern upon conduct." To Weaver, "ideas which have their reference to . . . the *individuum* . . . are false." Echoing an ancient notion that had long been challenged by historicist philosophy when Weaver wrote, he asserts that "knowledge" has to be of the universal, not the individual. He decries "the shift from speculative inquiry to investigation of experience."¹⁴ That universality might be a concrete, experiential reality rather than a purely intellectual, ahistorical truth does not here occur to him. Eric Voegelin provides a much needed counterweight to the abstractionist intellectual trend that affects even a thinker like Weaver. Voegelin does so by drawing attention to the experiential reality of what he calls the Ground. Unfortunately, he at the same time and inconsistently gives aid-and-comfort to anti-histori-

¹⁴ Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948), 4, 22, 68, 13.

cism by propounding a notion of radical transcendence. That notion, too, tends to rob history as such of meaning and contradicts the possibility of incarnation. Straussians and Voegelinians find common ground at the point where their respective positions are philosophically the weakest. Straussianism has been able to invade American conservatism on its philosophically perhaps most unprotected flank, which is its halting, fumbling conception of history and its correspondingly weak notion of universality or "higher values."

Strauss the Anti-Conservative

What is anti-conservative about Strauss's philosophy is not that he affirms universality, but that he conceives of universality in a radically ahistorical way. Neither is it anti-conservative to believe that philosophers do, in a sense, transcend particular traditions or that there is often tension between good philosophy and the conventions of society. What is problematic, indeed, suggestive of rigid dogmatism, is the assumption that philosophy and natural right are by definition opposed to convention. It is here that Straussianism links up with the new Jacobinism that has proved so appealing to neoconservatives. It has already been discussed that, according to some interpreters, Strauss's apparent endorsement of "natural right" is mere rhetoric and that he is, in the end, a moral nihilist. Be that as it may, he and his followers have contributed to the neo-Jacobin lack of interest in or scorn for the historically evolved traditions and circumstances of particular societies. They have also helped generate the neo-Jacobin idea that there exists a single, morally mandatory form of society, what Strauss calls a "universal and unchangeable norm."¹⁵ To make these observations and to point out that admirers of Strauss are ubiquitous in the circles that advocate "the global democratic revolution," the term used by George W. Bush, is of course not to have determined the extent to which Strauss himself would have supported the global democratic revolution as currently conceived.

Assumption of radical opposition between philosophy and convention is anti-conservative.

Dr. Grant Havers has attempted a defense of Strauss against charges that he is not conservative and that he is a democratist.¹⁶

¹⁵ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 13.

¹⁶ Grant Havers, "Leo Strauss, Willmoore Kendall, and the Meaning of Conservatism," *Humanitas*, Vol. XVIII, Nos. 1 & 2 (2005); hereinafter referred to in the footnotes as "Havers."

Dr. Havers exhibits an admirable willingness to be accommodating to and look for common ground with a thinker whose legacy is far from univocal. This writer is by no means unreceptive to such an effort, having pointed many years ago to potentially fruitful ideas in Strauss.¹⁷ It is regrettable that Dr. Havers's generosity of spirit should be at the expense of philosophical stringency.

*Strauss helped
create mind-
set receptive to
democratism*

It should be mentioned in passing that, contrary to Dr. Havers's assertion, *America the Virtuous* does not argue that Leo Strauss would today be a global democrat. The book hints at the likelihood that he would not be one, except perhaps for public consumption. What the book does argue is that Strauss and his leading disciples have helped create the mind-set that is today proving very hospitable to democratist notions, whether these notions are promulgated out of conviction or are a cover for ulterior motives. It is hardly coincidental that so many of Strauss's leading disciples and their students are in the forefront of those advocating a view of America and its role in the world that has a pronouncedly neo-Jacobin slant.

Making the case that Strauss is some kind of conservative, Dr. Havers compares his thinking to that of Willmoore Kendall. That comparison will not be discussed here. Kendall never achieved a philosophically well-integrated position and is in many respects a study in contradictions. Some elements of his thought, such as his populism and fondness for Rousseau, make him a rather curious representative of conservatism. Kendall's reputation as a thinker owes much to his work having been enthusiastically promoted in the early *National Review*, whose editor, William F. Buckley, Jr., had been Kendall's student at Yale. To figure out the extent to which Strauss and Kendall agree or disagree seems in the present context to be of marginal interest.

In dealing with the issue of historicism, Dr. Havers retains Strauss's philosophical weaknesses, specifically, the failure to absorb the philosophy of historical consciousness. Havers also exhibits the kind of intellectual innocence that has made so many putative traditionalists receptive to Straussianism. He never suspects that his reasons for regarding Strauss as a kind of conservative might point in just the opposite direction.

Dr. Havers writes that, for Strauss, "classical 'natural right'

¹⁷ See Ryn, "History and the Moral Order."

supports the eternity of truth (understood Platonically) over the flux of convention and opinion.”¹⁸ To believe in “the eternity of truth” is for Havers apparently the same as having a conservative trait. But universal truth or universal values can be understood in radically different ways. Some, including Plato, see universality as having revolutionary implications for the kind of society that is known to history. It seems not to bother Havers that Plato’s eternal truth is incompatible with convention and history in general. One might have thought that Plato’s contempt for historically evolved social arrangements and his considering driving all above ten years of age out of the city in order to give it a fresh start might be indicative of a radical strain in his thought. What would be conservative about wishing to drain society of its traditions and to start over according to an abstract plan? In the eighteenth century, the French Jacobins fervently advocated their own allegedly universal plan, and they, too, saw it as requiring a complete revamping of society. Burke the conservative opposed as arrogant, superficial and tyrannical the Jacobin desire to implement an ideal bearing no resemblance to any historically known society.

Platonic notion of universality has radical dimension.

Vaguely aware that a conservative is supposed to take history seriously, Dr. Havers argues with characteristic generosity that Strauss does appreciate the importance of history. Paradoxically, Havers at the same time draws the reader’s attention to Strauss’s belief that philosophy must *not* be a “historical discipline.” Havers *confirms* the above analysis that, for Strauss, “philosophy” and “convention” are incompatible but takes this view as a sign that Strauss has conservative leanings. If a conservative is one who cares about history, Strauss is at least to that extent a conservative, Havers argues, for Strauss takes an interest in history. “There is no evidence,” he states, “that Strauss rejected the study of history *tout court*.” It is thus supposed to be proof of Strauss’s conservatism that he did not reject the study of history *altogether*. But of course he didn’t reject the study of history *tout court*. Only a great fool could do such a thing. Contrary to Havers’s apparent assumption, believing that history matters in some way is by itself not the same as having a conservative disposition. Karl Marx took a great deal of interest in history, can, indeed, be said to have been in some respects more genuinely interested in it than Strauss.

No serious thinker would deny that history matters.

¹⁸ Havers, 12.

Havers seems not to realize that what is at issue is the *role* that a particular thinker sees history as playing. Is it, in particular, important to understanding universality?

Strauss pays lip-service to tradition while subverting it.

Surprisingly, given his objective of defending Strauss as a conservative, Dr. Havers argues that, for Strauss, the philosopher's acceptance of convention is grudging and deceitful. Still, to show interest in history and to tolerate convention is conservative, Havers argues. Does it then make no difference that Strauss's reason for paying attention to tradition is completely different from that of one who regards the study of history as essential to man's understanding his own humanity and achieving a civilized existence? Strauss does not think that studying history and respecting tradition is conducive to insight. The philosopher takes an interest in convention to subvert or circumvent it. The philosopher needs to be familiar with convention better to protect himself from and mislead the society in which he lives. In this endeavor Strauss counsels caution. According to Strauss, Havers writes, "philosophers must be ever mindful of their historical context in order to write with caution about their subject."¹⁹ The philosopher should articulate his convention-busting truth in ways that will not subject him to the wrath of the surrounding society. He must practice the art of dissembling, of paying lip-service to traditional beliefs. Strauss's ideas are here as elsewhere those of one who sees the philosopher as a conspirator against the society in which he finds himself. But according to Havers, Strauss's "awareness of the need to preserve the ways of tradition suggests that Strauss is sufficiently conservative."²⁰ Sufficient by what standard? Dr. Havers's case for Strauss amounts to saying that a radical who proceeds *cautiously* qualifies as a conservative.

Strauss's attitude towards history has almost nothing to do with the conservative belief that, without its historical achievements and without familiarity more generally with its own past, mankind would be at sea. The Burkean is *conservative* of something historically evolved because it is thought to have intrinsic value. Burke respects custom and what he calls "prejudice" not as a final standard of good but because he believes that the accumulated heritage of civilization contains a wisdom far greater than

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

that of any thinker or intellectual group living at a particular time. The great moral, intellectual and aesthetical accomplishments of the human race are needed to help orient us to life's higher potential.

Strauss shows little awareness that man's sense of the universal might be deepened and broadened by the experience of the human race. For him, convention is merely what historical accident happens to have thrown up. History in general is for him as for Plato a meaningless flux. It most certainly is not integral to philosophy. Only reason, unclouded by historical prejudice, can discern universality. Convention is an *obstacle* to truth as well as to the philosophers' receiving their rightful influence. Strauss's belief that the intellectual resources of a small group of philosophers can supplant the thought and experience of all mankind establishes a profound difference between him and those who stress our dependence on previous generations. According to the Burkean conservative, the ahistorical excogitation of an individual or group is more likely to produce self-serving, historically provincial and ideologically rigid abstractions than a better grasp of the universal.

For Strauss, tradition is obstacle to reason.

For Strauss, as interpreted by Dr. Havers, "Historicism requires utter acceptance of the movement of History, and an embrace of its authority *alone*."²¹ This statement unintentionally conveys the reductionism and sheer artificiality of the Straussian conception of historicism. Should it not be obvious to all that human beings are flawed and fall far short of perfection? How, then, could anyone "utterly" accept a movement of history that has to be in large part of human making? And how could anyone "utterly" accept the movement of history when history always contains opposing forces and is simultaneously moving in many directions? Burke stood athwart one powerful historical movement represented by the French Revolution and took great personal risks defending another, the cause of the American colonists. A principle of selection was obviously at work. He had a profound sense of moral right and obligation, but his apprehension of how universality could best be served in the historical situation in which he found himself was not derived from ahistorical ratiocination. His choosing involved reason, to be sure, but reason of a kind that is indistin-

²¹ *Ibid.*, 15 (emphasis in the original).

guishable from an acute historical consciousness. The latter heightened his sense of both the dangers and the higher opportunities of the present.

*“Historicist”
of the
Straussians
a simpleton.*

To consider further the Straussian notion of “historicism,” how could anybody favor “utter acceptance of the movement of history” when it is impossible to know just what the movement of history is at a particular time? The historicist here depicted is clearly a simpleton hardly deserving of a place in philosophical discussion. Yet it is with this kind of figure that Strauss and so many others engage in a battle to the death. The battle has a foregone conclusion. It would have been very different if Strauss had taken up the kind of historicist philosophy that threatens the very basis of his thought. He never comes close to doing so. Having appointed “historicism” as his main opposition, Strauss is able to stick to his theme of conflict between history and philosophy.

*Only
synthesis
bridges the
gap between
universality
and particu-
larity.*

Like Strauss, Dr. Havers lacks the conception of synthesis. Trying to show that Strauss does not neglect history, he quotes with approval the statement of Emil Kleinhaus that “Strauss was a historian who bridged the gap between history and philosophy by extracting the universal from the particular.”²² Neither the author of this statement nor Havers understands that to conceive of the universal as something extracted from the particular is not to bridge but to retain the gap between history and universality, though it means returning to Aristotle rather than Plato. The former did have much greater respect than Plato for concrete historical circumstances and could perhaps even be said to have had an ancient Greek premonition of the need for a more historical understanding of human existence. Yet Aristotle remained, though more in his stated epistemology than in his philosophical practice, committed to an ahistorical conception of philosophy and knowledge. Neither he nor the Greek and Roman historians developed the kind of awareness of the historicity of human existence that broke through in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

What Dr. Havers as well as Strauss leaves out of consideration is the idea that the real principle of moral, aesthetical and philosophical selection is a synthesis of universality and particularity. Stuck as they are in a philosophical cul-de-sac, Strauss and his followers can make no sense of such an idea: it must strike them as

²² *Ibid.*, 15n24. Quoted from Emil A. Kleinhaus, “Piety, Universality, and History: Leo Strauss on Thucydides,” *Humanitas*, Vol. XIV, No. 1 (2001).

incomprehensible gibberish, a contradiction in terms. Universality and particularity—specifically, “philosophy” and “convention”—must be distinct and even opposed. Only individuals in a similar intellectual predicament could find Strauss’s notion of natural right and history persuasive.

Radical Implications

Though careful not to tip his hand too much and too often, Strauss himself does indicate the radical, even revolutionary import of his own ahistorical notion of universality. He writes, for example, that “the acceptance of any universal or abstract principles has necessarily a revolutionary, disturbing, unsettling effect.”²³ The neo-Jacobin, revolutionary propensity of many so-called neoconservatives shows that they regard universal principles as having in politics the same effect as Strauss sees universal principles as having in philosophy. The desire of many neoconservatives to clear the decks of historically evolved beliefs and institutions extends to America itself. The America they champion is not the actual, historically distinctive America with its deep roots in Christian and English civilization but a country of their own theoretical invention, which owes its greatness to what are alleged to be its ahistorical, rational founding principles. The America of neoconservatism breaks sharply with the America of history.

For Strauss, universal principles are “revolutionary.”

Despite the label that they have adopted and by which they have become known, many or most of the leading neoconservatives think of themselves as representing a progressive, even revolutionary force. According to Professor Harry Jaffa, a leading disciple of Strauss, “To celebrate the American Founding is . . . to celebrate revolution.” The American Revolution in behalf of freedom may appear mild “as compared with subsequent revolutions in France, Russia, China, Cuba, or elsewhere,” Jaffa notes, but “it nonetheless embodied the greatest attempt at innovation that human history has recorded.”²⁴ America turns its back on the past. What is admirable is the *idea* of America. For Irving Kristol, who claims to

Neoconservatives consider themselves progressives.

²³ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 13.

²⁴ Harry V. Jaffa, “Equality as a Conservative Principle,” in William F. Buckley, Jr., and Charles R. Kesler, eds., *Keeping the Tablets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 86.

be an admirer of Strauss, the United States is “ideological, like the Soviet Union of yesteryear.”²⁵

Term
“Founding”
conceals
America’s
historical
heritage.

Straussians are fond of referring to “the Founding” of the United States, because that term suggests that America sprang from a fresh start. Turning its back on the bad old ways of Europe, America adopted ahistorical universal principles. The Straussian use of the term “Founding” conceals that prior to the War of Independence, which Straussians prefer to call “the American Revolution,” and prior to the framing of the Constitution, America was already constituted as functioning societies along the lines of classical, Christian and specifically English traditions. The term conceals also that the American colonists rebelled against the British government in order to *reclaim* their old historically evolved and respected rights as Englishmen, which King and Parliament were denying them. The phrase “American Revolution” conceals the great extent to which, after the War of Independence, America, including the U.S. Constitution and not least the Bill of Rights, represented a continuation of its historical heritage.²⁶

Neoconserva-
tives champion
ahistorical,
ideological
America.

Led by the Straussians, neoconservatives have long tried to transfer the patriotism of Americans from their historically formed society to the ideological America more to the neoconservatives’ liking. They have tried to make the so-called Founding, including the work of the framers of the Constitution, seem the implementation of an ahistorical idea conceived by anti-traditional lawgivers. In recent decades the neoconservatives have even tried, with considerable success, to redefine American conservatism accordingly. Far-fetched though it may sound, they have, in effect, persuaded many Americans of limited education to think of conservatism as celebrating a radical understanding of America. Irving Kristol’s son William has long argued that, for America to be able to carry out its universalist ideological mission in the world, American government must have great military and other governmental might. He and the neoconservatives have had to confront

²⁵ Irving Kristol, “The Neoconservative Persuasion: What it was, and what it is,” *The Weekly Standard*, Aug. 25, 2003.

²⁶ For a discussion of the meaning of the War of Independence and the continuity of America’s “founding” with its past, see Ryn, *America the Virtuous*, esp. chs. 5 and 12. See also Joseph Baldacchino, “The Unraveling of American Constitutionalism: From Customary Law to Permanent Innovation,” *Humanitas*, Vol. XVIII, Nos. 1 & 2 (2005).

the old, deep-seated American suspicion of strong central power, a suspicion that used to be synonymous with American conservatism. Kristol has argued that, now that people of virtue and insight are in a position to rule America, this old prejudice must be abandoned. In the view of Kristol senior, viewed by many as the “godfather of neoconservatism,” the historical role of neoconservatism has been “to convert the Republican party, and conservatism in general, against their wills,” to the new conception of government.²⁷ Convert them in whose interest, one might ask. It is obviously not in the interest of the waning Anglo-American leadership class that stood within and derived its authority from America’s old constitutionalist tradition and the general culture from which it is inseparable.

Another leading neoconservative, Michael Ledeen, who was an advisor on national security in the Reagan White House, openly portrays the America with which he identifies as a destroyer of existing societies. America turns its back even on its own historical roots. According to Ledeen, “Creative destruction is our middle name, both within our society and abroad. We tear down the old order every day Our enemies have always hated this whirlwind of energy and creativity, which menaces their traditions [We] must destroy them to advance our historic mission.”²⁸ “We” are obviously those who wish to dethrone historically evolved elites. For Ledeen, innovation, the overturning of existing order, is the essence of human history. Though Strauss and people like Ledeen may disagree on various issues, they are cooperating in the task of dislodging those whose spiritual, moral, cultural and intellectual identity and social standing are derived from long-standing tradition.

Some prominent neoconservatives who are now drawn to the new Jacobinism were once Marxists. Having become less hostile to the society in which they live and more friendly to capitalism, they have not abandoned their old desire for a world free of traditionally formed elites. They want those removed who, because of their remaining attachment to old roots, resist the claim of the new “enlightened” elite to national and international dominance. Like

Neo-Jacobins favor capitalism as way of destroying old elites.

²⁷ Irving Kristol, “The Neoconservative Persuasion.”

²⁸ Michael Ledeen, *The War Against the Terror Masters* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002), 212-213.

Marx, the new Jacobins see the spread of progressive, anti-traditional capitalism as an effective way of dismantling old societies around the world.²⁹ Needless to say, it is possible to understand capitalism very differently.³⁰ Democracy, as conceived by the new Jacobins, is also seen as a break with the past and as well-suited to dislodging older elites. Strauss might not have approved of all the ideological predilections of neoconservatism, but he facilitated its rise and that of the new Jacobinism by denigrating tradition.

America has already moved far in the direction of the kind of regime change that the new Jacobins favor, and America thus meets with their qualified approval. But much remains to be done finally to sever America from its old traditions, specifically, those rooted in Christianity. The rising new leadership class still worries about a possible reinvigoration and return of the old elite. Here Strauss's discrediting of "historicism" and his ahistorical conception of universality serve a most useful function. His work has contributed significantly to a weakening of the American attachment to a particular historical heritage, thus eroding the basis on which traditional America might stage a comeback. Not the least of Strauss's accomplishments is to have persuaded naive and intellectually feeble traditionalists to give the new elite a helping hand.

²⁹ For a discussion of how fondness for capitalism can be related to a desire to eradicate inherited culture, see Ryn, *America the Virtuous*, Chapter 14, "Jacobin Capitalism."

³⁰ See, for example, Wilhelm Röpke, *A Humane Economy: The Social Framework of the Free Market* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 1998; first published in 1960) and Joseph Baldacchino, *Economics and the Moral Order* (Washington, DC: National Humanities Institute, 1986). See also Ryn, *America the Virtuous*, chapter 14.