

Leo Strauss and American Foreign Policy

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(Summer 2004)

Copied from *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness: Ten Years of the Claremont Review of Books*. Ed. Charles R. Kesler and John B. Kienker. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012 (orig. pub. Summer 2004).

Quite a few of President Bush's critics maintain that since some prominent members of the administration and their defenders are known to be former students of Leo Strauss or of Straussians, one can trace Bush's foreign policy to Strauss's political ideas. Straussians in Washington tend to be neoconservatives, and, in foreign policy, prominent neocons like William Kristol and Robert Kagan advocate a policy of "benevolent hegemony." In their argument, a benign American imperialism is justified for two reasons. First, it provides security against foreign attack; that is, it delivers "strategic benefits." But their real enthusiasm is reserved for its second purpose, which is democratic reform of the rest of the world.

That stance, they argue, not only serves American interest; it is a moral imperative. The policy of benevolent hegemony will "relish the opportunity for national engagement, embrace the possibility of national greatness, and restore a sense of the heroic." Kristol and Kagan also argue that their view is supported by the principles of the American Founding: "For conservatives to preach the importance of upholding the core elements of the Western tradition at home, but to profess indifference to the fate of American principles abroad, is an inconsistency that cannot help but gnaw at the heart of conservatism."

My impression as an outside observer is that Straussian influence in the administration has been grossly exaggerated. But let us assume for discussion's sake that it is strong. Since Strauss has been wildly accused of everything from being an admirer of Hitler to being a devotee of Wilsonian progressivism, I think it high time to clarify his understanding of foreign policy. I shall argue that although there is some common ground, Strauss's overall approach is quite different from that of Kristol, Kagan, and other prominent neoconservatives in and out of the administration.

CLASSICAL FOREIGN POLICY

The confrontation of the West with Communism, Strauss wrote in *The City and Man* (1964), has demonstrated that "no bloody or unbloody change of society can

eradicate the evil in man: as long as there will be men, there will be malice, envy and hatred, and hence there cannot be a society which does not have to employ coercive restraint." Strauss implies, among other things, that the extravagant hope for permanent progress in human affairs believed in by Woodrow Wilson and his contemporary admirers is a delusion. In particular, he wrote, the ideal of "a universal state, unitary or federative" (Strauss appears to be speaking of the United Nations) is also a delusion. "If that federation is taken too seriously," wrote Strauss, "as a milestone on man's onward march toward the perfect and hence universal society, one is bound to take great risks supported by nothing but an inherited and perhaps antiquated hope, and thus to endanger the very progress one endeavors to bring about."

To begin with, then, according to Strauss each nation should conduct its own foreign policy, and it should not turn its policy over to international organizations. In current parlance, Strauss was a unilateralist, not a multilateralist.

He concluded the passage quoted above by remarking that the lesson of the Cold War is that "political society remains what it always has been: a partial or particular society whose most urgent and primary task is its self-preservation and whose highest task is its self-improvement."

In his book *What Is Political Philosophy?* (1959) Strauss addressed the grounds of that lesson in the principles of classical political philosophy. For the classics, wrote Strauss, foreign policy is primarily concerned with "the survival and independence of one's political community." For that reason, "the ultimate aim of foreign policy is not essentially controversial. Hence classical political philosophy is not guided by questions concerning the external relations of the political community. It is concerned primarily with the inner structure of the political community"

For Strauss, then, who closely followed the classics on this subject, foreign policy is ministerial to domestic policy, because "self-improvement" or human excellence is the "highest task" of politics. The purpose of foreign policy is therefore to secure the means, admittedly the "urgent and primary" means, namely, preservation, or national security, to that high end. For that reason, Aristotle singled out Sparta for strong criticism in his *Politics*. Sparta's error was to organize its laws around the belief that the purpose of politics is the domination of other nations by war.

Thus according to Strauss, the purpose of foreign policy is or ought to be survival and independence, or self-preservation, and nothing else.

He comments on this passage as follows:

the good city is [not] guided in its relations with other cities, Greek or barbarian, by considerations of justice: the size of the territory of the good city is determined by that city's moderate needs and by nothing else; the relation of the city to the other cities belongs to the province of wisdom rather than of justice; the good city is not a part of a community of cities or is not dedicated to the common good of that community or does not serve other cities.

The last part of Strauss's remark implies that the foreign policy of a sensible nation is never devoted to the good of other nations, except to the extent that the good of another nation accidentally happens to promote one's own nation's existence. For the same reason, a sensible nation will not engage in imperial expansion for its own aggrandizement—though it might have to do so for its own survival. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates advocates a war of imperial expansion in order to acquire the

territory needed to sustain the city's material needs. By the time Socrates has finished purging the city of luxuries, its territorial needs are likely to be quite small. This expansionist war, then, is not likely to amount to much.

We must face up to this disturbing Socratic endorsement of expansionism or imperialism in case of necessity. For although the size of the conquest may not "amount to much," it might mean something quite drastic to the neighboring city that happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. It will definitely require the seizure of property and killing of men who oppose this expansion. Socrates in effect shows that he knows how problematic his open defense of aggressive warfare is, when he says that the government must lie to the citizens about the true origin of the city's territory. The citizens will be told, in a noble lie, that the native land on which they are born was their mother, not that it was taken by force from a foreign nation.

We may sum up the Socratic approach by saying that although foreign policy is in principle amoral, because it is dictated by the selfish needs of the political community, it is also moderate, because the needs of the city are limited, given the primacy of its concern for civic virtue and therefore domestic policy.

Later in the *Republic*, Socrates proposes a striking mitigation of the usual Greek manner of conducting war: the city that they are founding will no longer kill or enslave the conquered population, nor destroy its property, if the conquered city is Greek. The ground of this policy is that Greeks are ethnically akin. If a city is defeated in war, says Socrates, only those who are responsible for the war will be punished. It is probable that this Socratic suggestion arises from the humanity of his philosophic orientation, which transcends loyalty to a particular political regime. We can perhaps see in this proposal the roots of the much milder rules of conquest established by John Locke and other early modern thinkers.

THE PERILS OF EMPIRE

Would Aristotle agree with this Strauss-endorsed Platonic approach to foreign policy? One of Aristotle's arguments against domination of other nations is that it is "not even lawful" for one city to "rule and exercise mastery over" other cities "whether they wish it or not." That is, Aristotle, who is always closer to "common sense" than Plato, speaks as if there is, after all, such a thing as justice and injustice among nations. Strauss seems to take Plato's view, not Aristotle's, as the genuine expression of the classical approach. Perhaps that is because Plato's analysis goes to the root of the matter, while Aristotle deliberately remains on the level of the perspective of the citizen and statesman (visible in Aristotle's interchangeable use of "lawful" and "just" in the passage quoted).

The classical thinker who seems to be the most obvious exception to Strauss's account is Thucydides. Unlike Plato or Aristotle, he made foreign policy central to his account of the political. Nonetheless, Strauss denied that Thucydides disagreed with Plato about the importance of a good regime at home. Instead, Thucydides showed that the intransigent urgency of questions of survival, conquest, and war often overwhelms what would otherwise be, in Strauss's words, "the overriding concern with domestic politics." As for "the good order within the city," Thucydides "leaves [it] to the moderate citizens."

Strauss's discussion of Thucydides brings out forcefully the same twofold theme that we noticed in his interpretation of Plato. In Thucydides' opinion, as summarized by Strauss, there is on one side "what one may call the natural right of the stronger" to conquer and expand, but on the other side, this natural right "does not lead in all cases to expansionism. There are limits beyond which expansion is no longer safe." In other words, "to say that under certain conditions empire is possible and necessary is not the same as to be an 'imperialist.'"

The Athenian experiment with indefinite expansionism was doomed (among other reasons) by a simple fact, which the Athenian leaders after Pericles failed to recognize: "it is in the long run impossible to encourage the city's desire for 'having more' at the expense of other cities without encouraging the desire of the individual for 'having more' at the expense of his fellow citizens." The Athenians did not see, as Socrates did see in his recommendation of the "noble lie" in the *Republic*, that a frankly expansionist foreign policy is bound to undermine the political order at home as well as, eventually, the imperialist policy abroad.

It is important to understand why, for Strauss and the classical political philosophers, the purpose of foreign policy should be limited to self-preservation or necessity. Obviously, it is not because life has no higher purpose than mere survival. Rather, it is because all policy, foreign and domestic, should be in the service of one thing: the well being or happiness of society. This means that government's most important task is to help the citizens live the good life by promoting the right ideal of human excellence. That is emphatically a matter of domestic policy, not foreign. For that reason, in principle, foreign policy is easy, and domestic policy is very difficult. No one disputes that preservation is better than death; but all claims about the content of the life of human excellence are inherently controversial.

Someone might object that the classical approach endorsed by Strauss seems to be nothing but a crass "realism." It might seem that any nation, however tyrannical or degraded, is justified in defending its own survival using any means that happen to be effective. This would be a correct assessment of the classical position, if it were not for the point just mentioned: for the classics, the fundamental rightness or wrongness of political action or policy depends on the rightness or wrongness of the political regime which it supports. For the classics, justice, or what Strauss called *natural right*, is to be found in the best political order, called by Strauss the best political regime. "Political activity is then properly directed," he wrote in *Natural Right and History* (1953), "if it is directed toward human perfection or virtue [Therefore] the end of the city is peaceful activity in accordance with the dignity of man, and not war and conquest."

In sum, the classics' "realist" conception of foreign policy is ultimately justified only insofar as it serves their "idealist" conception of domestic policy.

STRAUSS'S PRINCIPLES TODAY

Today, liberals favor the idea that the nations of the world should turn their foreign policy over to international bodies like the United Nations or the European Union. On this point, the neoconservatives as well as the classics would dissent. No one can be expected to understand the interests of a nation better than its own citizens

and statesmen. For this reason, the classics would have viewed multilateral organizations with suspicion. Strauss did so explicitly, as we saw earlier.

Moreover, the purpose of foreign policy is national security, not humanitarian benevolence, though this does not imply that all alliances are to be shunned.

For one thing, it is easy to see that the United States, or any nation, is justified in making alliances with other nations for the sake of its own survival. In a dangerous world, one needs allies, and alliances may require sending one's own soldiers to die on behalf of other nations.

In the classical or Straussian approach, alliances are justified even with nations who oppress their own people. One's own survival, not the well-being of the peoples of other nations, is the standard. In order to defeat Hitler, America had to support Stalin, the most murderous tyrant in world history. To defeat Iraq, America arguably had to ally itself with despotic Saudi Arabia.

But another implication of Strauss's approach is more controversial. It is the ruthless subordination of the good of other nations to one's own good. The foreign policy of the classics is essentially selfish, because the main purpose of all good politics is "self-improvement," the advantage of one's own political community, not the common good of other political communities. The foreign policy of Strauss and the classics seeks neither *hegemony* over other nations nor *benevolence* toward other nations, unless, accidentally, one or the other is a means to survival.

Yet this very selfishness leads to results that are quite moral, if morality is defined as cultivation of the good life for one's own people, while refraining from injuring others unless they attempt to injure you. Straussian foreign policy does not seek to be benevolent, but its inherent moderation makes it in effect benevolent, especially in contrast with the kind of imperialism practiced by regimes that merely want to lord it over as many nations as possible.

Let us apply this criterion—improve one's own nation, but leave other nations alone, except when one's security is at risk—to the war in Iraq that began in 2003. For Strauss and the classics, the sole justification for the war would have been that Iraq was a national security threat to the United States, or, what is the same thing, to the allies of the United States. The most convincing evidence of that threat would not have been whether or not Iraq possessed "weapons of mass destruction." After all, many other nations, such as France and Britain, have nuclear weapons, and no serious American is arguing that this poses some sort of threat to America's security. For Strauss, the truly important question to consider is whether Iraq (or any other nation) has been actively planning or supporting the killing of American citizens or citizens of America's most important allies. As it happens, there is quite a bit of evidence that Iraq was doing just that. Angelo Codevilla's excellent series of articles in the *Claremont Review of Books* has convincingly shown the connection between Iraq and terrorists who seek to harm, and who have harmed and do harm to, American citizens and their allies. But for some reason the Bush Administration was not very energetic in presenting that case to the public. The administration sometimes does make this kind of argument in defense of the war, but it seems to prefer to stress that the war is good because it serves the interest of other nations.

Obviously it is in America's interest that foreign governments stop sponsoring and aiding murderous acts against America and its allies, especially against Israel,

its most reliable ally in the Middle East. To that end, it was appropriate not only to defeat Iraq militarily, but also to deter future hostility to America by punishing the members of the former Iraqi government who supported these murderously anti-American policies. So far American forces have not done much punishing. Instead, their focus has been on responding to attacks, and "nation-building." But if Strauss is right, it is not America's job to provide its defeated enemies with democratic or just governments, unless there is some real connection with American national security. The question is whether there is such a connection. If there is, and if it is possible to build a democratic Iraqi government, then nation-building makes sense. If the classical-Straussian approach is right, neoconservatives and other defenders of the Bush policy should explain how nation-building (1) is possible, and (2) serves America's security. Whether it happens to be good for the Iraqis should not be the criterion of America's Iraq policy.

From Strauss's point of view, however, the case against nation-building in Iraq is strengthened by the fact that neither Iraq nor any of its major regions has ever in history been governed democratically. It appears that Iraq lacks the elementary preconditions of constitutional democracy. I mean the minimal democratic virtues of personal self-restraint and feisty self-assertion in defense of liberty, along with a widespread belief in the moral and/or religious obligation of everyone to respect the equal rights of others to life, liberty (including the free exercise of religion), and property.

It has been reported that American academics have been giving lectures in Iraq telling their audiences that they need to adopt Thomas Jefferson's view of religious liberty. What these academics seem not to understand is that government protection of the free exercise of religion only works when there are enough people in the regime who actually believe in it. But for most of the world and through most of human history, there has been no separation of religious from political authority. This is true of Iraq, alas. Words on a piece of paper (an Iraqi Constitution, for example) will have zero political effect if there is no strong support for their enforcement, and no understanding of why their enforcement is a good thing.

Strauss would recommend that America stick to doing what serves its security. If that involves doing good to other nations, so be it. If it involves leaving other nations alone, that is fine too. But Americans should not confuse matters by engaging in enthusiastic talk about national greatness and restoring a sense of the heroic by sending their own soldiers to die in battles that perhaps serve the interests of others, but not our own.

Worse, the attempt to build democracy in a place where the minimal preconditions of democracy are not present may well cause more harm than good. How many civilians will the American forces have to kill before it becomes clear that that well-intentioned goal is indefinitely out of reach? The attempt to do good where the good in question is impossible may lead to the unnecessary deaths not only of American soldiers, but also of many Iraqis.

If victory in Iraq is defined as democracy in Iraq, American forces will have to remain there for a long time. During their prime, Rome and Britain were pretty good at governing other nations. With few exceptions, Americans have never had the heart for it.

AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

Kristol and Kagan have another argument for benevolent hegemonism. This one is grounded on the specific nature of the American political order. They argue that the principles of the founding imply that America has a moral obligation not only to make the world safe for democracy but to make the world democratic. I believe that the political thought of the founding is opposed to that view. With regard to foreign policy, the principles of the founding lead to the same conclusion as do the principles of Strauss and the classics, though by a different path.

The classical approach is one of ruthless selfishness for an elevated end: the noble and good life of the citizens. The founders rejected that approach in the name of the natural moral law, which denies the legitimacy of expansion and hegemonism except in case of necessity. Yet both approaches lead to a moderate foreign policy in the service of a just political order.

According to America's Declaration of Independence, every nation is entitled to a "separate and equal station" among "the powers of the earth." That is because of "the laws of nature and of nature's God," which tell us that "all men are created equal" and that we are obliged to respect men's equal rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." One way that the right to liberty is exercised is through each nation's collective right to consent to its own government, in a "separate and equal station" independent of the government of other nations. There is therefore no right of one nation to conquer or interfere in the affairs of any other nation, except to the extent required for self-preservation. Locke's strictures against conquest in the *Second Treatise* are based on exactly this understanding of the law of nature.

In *The Federalist*, James Madison explains what the relations will be between the United States under the proposed Constitution of 1787, and any states that may refuse to ratify the Constitution. His answer: "although no political relation can subsist between the assenting and dissenting States, yet the moral relations will remain uncanceled. The claims of justice, both on one side and on the other, will be in force, and must be fulfilled; the rights of humanity must in all cases be duly and mutually respected." As we have seen, this is not the orientation of Plato or Thucydides.

For Madison and the founders, the natural law obligates a nation to respect "the rights of humanity" in other nations. The same natural law, which is also the ground of the social compact, obligates a nation's government to secure the lives, liberties, and estates of its own citizens. It does not authorize government to sacrifice its own citizens for the sake of other nations' citizens.

That is why John Quincy Adams, one of the chief architects of early American foreign policy, declared in a speech delivered on July 4, 1821: America "goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own."

Commenting on this famous Adams quotation, Kristol and Kagan write, "But why not [go abroad in search of monsters to destroy]? The alternative is to leave monsters on the loose, ravaging and pillaging to their hearts' content, as Americans stand by and watch."

Strauss and the classics, together with John Quincy Adams, would admit that there always will be many monsters abroad in the world, ravaging and pillaging to their hearts' content. It is not the obligation of one nation to solve other na-

tions' problems, no matter how heartbreaking. For the founders, that would be to violate the fundamental terms of the social compact. For Strauss and the classics, that would be a distraction from the highest purpose of politics, self-improvement through the right domestic policy. The Americans rejected Machiavelli's belligerent republicanism, with its celebration of hegemonism and conquest. Instead, the founders, following thinkers like Locke and Montesquieu, restored to politics a proper restraint on the dangerous human passion to dominate others, both at home and abroad. For this reason, the founders' anti-imperialist conception of foreign policy remains fully comprehensible and defensible in terms of Strauss's account of classical political philosophy.

To avoid misunderstanding, I should emphasize that neither Strauss nor the founders were isolationists. In his Farewell Address, when George Washington warned, "'Tis our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances, with any portion of the foreign world," he was thinking of America's former ally France, whose quarrel with Britain was not America's quarrel. "Europe has a set of primary interests, which to us have none, or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns." But Washington was far from opposing all alliances. Without the alliance with France a few years earlier, America's war for independence might have failed. He therefore recommended "temporary alliances" so that America would retain freedom of action to "choose peace or war, as our interest guided by justice shall counsel." America's *interest* (national security) was to be limited by *justice* (refraining from violating the rights of other nations).

In light of this summary of the positions of Strauss, the classics, and the American Founders, one must conclude that the neoconservative approach, as articulated by Kristol and Kagan, is only partly compatible with that of Strauss and the American Founders. It appears that the neocons are influenced by the political principles of American Progressivism—of modern liberalism. That is why, I suspect, Kristol and other neocons frequently express their admiration for Theodore Roosevelt, a man who by and large rejected the principles of the founding and the limited foreign policy spawned by those principles. Roosevelt's foreign policy did not seek merely to preserve the nation against foreign enemies. Instead, as T.R. wrote his essay in "Expansion and Peace," the best policy is a frank imperialism all over the world: "every expansion of a great civilized power means a victory for law, order, and righteousness." Thus the American occupation of the Philippines, T.R. believed, will enable "one more fair spot of the world's surface" to be "snatched from the forces of darkness. Fundamentally the cause of expansion is the cause of peace."

Yet there is still a big difference between Kristol and today's liberals who, also, follow the Progressive ideal of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. Kristol, like Roosevelt, but unlike Wilson, never forgets that "strengthening America's security" must always remain a leading purpose of foreign policy. At the beginning of this article, we noted that the neoconservatives defend benevolent hegemony as being both in America's security interest and in the interest of the nations whom we liberate. As Max Boot has observed, neocons are "hard," not "soft" Wilsonians. Kristol therefore opposes the liberal-Wilsonian preference to turn American foreign policy over to international institutions like the United Nations. He also opposes the

Wilsonian tendency to think that any policy that serves the self-interest of America is morally suspect.

The question that remains, however, is whether the neoconservative devotion to benevolent hegemony really is compatible with a foreign policy that secures the lives and liberties of Americans. A vain attempt to establish democracy in places like Iraq that have lived for millennia under one despotism after another may lead not to a more secure America, but to a needless and immoral waste of American lives.

What then should be done in Iraq? Answer: America should return to the principles of Washington and John Quincy Adams, and focus on two things. First, it should make sure that important Iraqis who supported Saddam Hussein are punished. Second, it should help Iraqis to set up a government which is likely to have at least some stability and decency, and which is unlikely to turn against America in the near future. American military forces should leave as soon as these two goals can be achieved. Events themselves may be moving American policy in precisely this direction. Lest my judgments seem too categorical, I will add this: given the multitude of possible means to these two simple ends, much must be left up to the prudence, the good sense, of the politicians to whom we constitutionally entrust our foreign policy.

None of this is meant to disparage the war in Iraq, or any other American intervention abroad, so long as it truly promotes the preservation of America. Nor are Americans obliged to wait for a foreign threat to become imminent before going to war, as many of President Bush's critics have argued. War is effectually declared, to invoke Locke again, whenever anyone evinces "by word or action, not a passionate and hasty, but a sedate settled design," upon the life of another. Saddam Hussein's decade-long series of attempts to kill Americans, using either his own forces or surrogates, was evidence enough. But we must not forget that in the end, war, like all public policies, must serve what Leo Strauss, the classics, and the founders regarded as the purpose of political life—namely, the cultivation of "peaceful activity in accordance with the dignity of man."

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ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK

2012