

The ideological forebears of Washington's 'neo-conservatives'

Stefan Steinberg
26 March 2003

The article by Bill Vann, “The controversy over US Congressman Moran: anti-Semitism, Zionism and the Iraq war,” correctly characterises the collaboration between pro-Zionist elements in the Bush administration, such as Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle, with such born-again Christian fundamentalists as the president himself. The ideology that underlies the thinking of the administration’s most hawkish and criminal elements, often referred to as “neo-conservatives”, is worth further examination.

Ideologically, Bush himself is a cipher, the proverbial empty vessel that can be filled at will according to immediate propaganda requirements. In his discussions with political cronies, Bush reportedly favours analogies drawn from sports and western comic books. Spiced with prejudices drawn from his supposedly diligent study of the bible, his vulgar and disingenuous remarks are then honed down into the easily digestible sound bites that characterise his public addresses.

Bush’s entourage may have been nervous in the early days of the administration on the few occasions when the president was called upon to speak without a prompter. But in the meantime, the utter subservience of the American media and the complete prostration of the Democratic Party have convinced Rumsfeld, Cheney and company that there is nothing to worry about. Nobody is prepared to comment on the absurdities, non sequiturs and downright lies that characterise a Bush press conference.

The cement that holds together the various strands of the Bush administration is their pocketbooks and stock market portfolios. The devastation of Iraq and awarding of reconstruction contracts to Republican-connected companies make perfect sense to Cheney, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz.

While the world is currently fed the lies that the American war campaign is about “democracy”, “freedom” and even the “protection of the environment”, on occasion the administration is more frank about its pursuit of geo-strategic interests. As Wolfowitz himself has said: “It is simply terrible when humans kill other humans and when a people wipe out a minority. It is certainly the case that one cannot stop such things happening in the world, but at the same time it is wrong to act as if the attempt to do so is motivated by mere humanitarian wishful thinking, and has nothing to do with genuine interests” (cited in *Spiegel online*).

Nevertheless it would be wrong to think that the Bush administration operates without a political ideology. There are educated and experienced academics and politicians in positions of influence who have very definite conceptions of how American domestic and foreign policy should be pursued. It is worth looking briefly at one particular strand of these ideas that plays a key role in

the aggressive foreign policy of the Bush administration. It also helps to explain the at first glance puzzling alliance in the Republican Party between right-wing advocates of Zionism such as Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle and Christian fundamentalists whose own anti-Semitic inclinations are no secret.

Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, for example, received a doctorate in political science from the University of Chicago, where he became an adherent of the political ideas of the German-Jewish political ideologist Leo Strauss.

Born in Germany, Strauss was forced to flee after the Nazi’s seized power in 1933. He emigrated to America with a letter of recommendation in his pocket from his political mentor and close friend, the jurist Carl Schmitt. Strauss went on to teach political science at the University of Chicago and gained prominence among a relatively small group of students and academics.

Strauss abhorred modern liberal democracy, which he saw as encouraging the most poisonous of vices—social equality—and opening the path to potential tyranny. Strauss saw at work in modern-day America all of the weaknesses of the German Weimar Republic, which collapsed and gave way to fascism. Politics, for Strauss, amounted to the defence and propagation of privilege. Against the equalising pressure of liberalism, Strauss advocated the creation of an aristocracy in the midst of American society. From the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, Strauss drew his advocacy of an aristocratic elite and disdain for the broad masses. Influenced by Martin Heidegger, Strauss developed a profound antipathy to modernism and the technological progress of modern society.

In her book *Leo Strauss and the American Right*, Shadia B. Drury writes from the standpoint of a sceptical liberal attempting to breathe life into what was correctly termed, in a recent WSWs article, the “stinking corpse” of American liberalism. Despite the shortcomings of her book she includes some interesting passages on the ideas of Leo Strauss.

For Strauss, according to Drury, the Holocaust was the logical outcome of modern society and the path of liberalism and democracy. “He [Strauss] believed that it was the ascendancy of a certain set of ill-conceived ideas in the history of the West which has led to the ‘barbarism we have witnessed’. He associated these ideas with modernity, liberalism and the rationalism of the Enlightenment. He believed that these ideas have triumphed at the expense of ancient wisdom and that their success had everything to do with the Holocaust. In other words the Holocaust was a logical outcome of the ascendancy of Enlightenment rationalism, nihilism, liberalism, and secularism” (p. 14).

Strauss was convinced that one of the most pernicious consequences

of liberal democracy was the decline of myths and religion as part of a nationalist ideology necessary to weld a people together.

Drury writes: “He [Strauss] values religion as a source of order and stability in society. He believes that religion provides the majority of people with the comfort they need to bear their harsh existence. He does not disagree with Marx that religion is the opium of the people, he just thinks people need their opium” (p. 12).

The priority accorded to the social role of religion by Strauss is significant in understanding the current collaboration between modern adherents of Strauss’s ideas and the Christian right.

Leo Strauss was a fervent opponent of any form of Jewish assimilation and at times argued against an independent Zionist state, which he stated made too many concessions to assimilation.

At the same time, when Zionist interests were threatened, Strauss consistently came to the support of the Israeli state. In a letter to the magazine *Commentary*, Strauss objected to an inference in an article that the state of Israel was established on a racist basis. Strauss insisted that political Zionism and the state of Israel had saved the Jews from “complete dissolution”, by which he meant not the Holocaust but rather the process of assimilation.

Strauss was convinced of mankind’s irredeemable wickedness which could only be restrained through a powerful state based on nationalism. In a letter to his friend Schmitt, Strauss wrote: “Because mankind is intrinsically wicked he has to be governed: Such governance can only be established, however, when men are united—and they can only be united against other people.”

Strauss proclaimed his opposition to fascism, but at the same time, on the basis of his anti-liberal sentiments, enjoyed close relations with the main legal architect of National Socialism. Carl Schmitt was the most important legal authority of the Nazi Third Reich and drew up all of the key laws used by the Nazis to take and hold onto state power.

Drury comments on the links between the two men in a passage that illustrates Strauss’s crude portrayal of political tendencies. Nevertheless, the passage demonstrates the way in which Strauss and Schmitt linked domestic and foreign policy and throws some light, I believe, on the thinking in Republican circles today:

“In a commentary on Carl Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political*, Strauss agrees with Schmitt that liberalism has turned life into entertainment, and has deprived it of its seriousness, intensity, and struggle.... Strauss shares the controversial Nazi jurist and political philosopher’s view that the fundamental distinction in politics is that of friend and foe. Schmitt admires the Nazis because they understood the importance of this distinction and they proceeded to exterminate their enemies, including internal enemies. Like Schmitt, Strauss believes that politics is first and foremost about the distinction between WE and THEY. Strauss thinks that a political order can be stable only if it is united by an external threat; and following Machiavelli, he maintains that if no external threat exists then one has to be manufactured. Had he lived to see the collapse of the Soviet Union, he would have been deeply troubled because the collapse of the evil empire poses a threat to America’s inner stability” (p. 23).

Under conditions of enormous social polarisation and social decay in today’s America, the significance of Strauss’s and Schmitt’s thinking in relation to internal opposition has not been lost on such prominent advocates of a war with Iraq as Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle.

Wolfowitz’s advocacy of an open acknowledgement of the economic and political interests underlying the pursuit of an aggressive and expansionist foreign policy also finds an echo in the

definition of American interests articulated by another enthusiast of Strauss’s thought—conservative ideologue Irving Kristol .

In 1983, Kristol elaborated his definition of nationalism: “Patriotism springs from love of the nation’s past; nationalism arises out of the hope for the nation’s future, distinctive greatness.... Neoconservatives believe ... that the goals of American foreign policy must go beyond a narrow, too literal definition of ‘national security.’ It is the national interest of a world power, as this is defined by a sense of national destiny ... not a myopic national security.”

His son William Kristol returns to the theme in his latest book, *The War over Iraq*, co-written with Lawrence F. Kaplan, where they clearly indicate that American imperialism will not stop at a war with Iraq. They state that the occupation of Iraq concerns more than “the future of the Middle East and the war against international terrorism. It concerns the role which America aims to play in the 21st century.” It is worth recalling that William Kristol had openly called for “a war against terror” nine days before the terror attacks of September 11.

For several decades after the Second World War, Strauss and his students remained a relatively unknown and idiosyncratic backwater of political ideology. Today, leading spokesmen of the conservative intellectual movement influenced by the ideas of Leo Strauss include writers, academics and scions of the political right such as Harry V. Jaffa, Joseph Cropsey, Allan Bloom (author of the best seller *The Closing of the American Mind*) Willmore Kendall, Irving Kristol, editor of the magazine *The Public Interest*, and son William Kristol, editor of the most important magazine of the new right, *The Weekly Standard*.

The rise to prominence of the backward nostrums of Strauss and his pupils is incomprehensible without grasping American liberalism’s continuous retreat since the 1970s. This retreat, epitomised by the complete political decay of the Democratic Party, has allowed a small group of ultra-reactionary thinkers—including ex-lefts who passed through the Democratic Party—to move from the fringes of the Republican Party to positions of influence.

There are definite links between the noxious nationalism and war-lust emanating from Washington and the anti-rational and reactionary theories which have already played such a disastrous role in the twentieth century.

The sickening spectacle of the prostration of the Democrats to Bush’s war confirms that the only force that can counter such tendencies is the American and world working class educated on the basis of socialist internationalism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact