

The Mysterious Mr. Strauss

“Leo Strauss: The European” and “The Closing of the Straussian Mind” by Mark Lilla, in *The New York Review of Books* (Oct. 21 & Nov. 4, 2004), 1755 Broadway, 5th fl., New York, N.Y. 10019-3780.

Thirty years after his death, Leo Strauss (1899–1973), a German-born émigré scholar, began popping up in various political journals as the satanic thinker behind the allegedly duplicitous neocon march to war in Iraq. The charge was baseless, argues Lilla, a professor at the University of Chicago’s Committee on Social Thought. For Strauss, if not for many of his American followers, ideological partisanship was a temptation philosophers should avoid.

Politics offered no solution to what Strauss regarded as the philosopher’s basic dilemma: how to live a life of perpetual questioning when most people and societies *need* the settled answers provided by political and religious authority. Strauss found a solution to the dilemma in the “esotericism” practiced by Alfarabi, the founder of medieval Islamic philosophy, and Maimonides, his medieval Jewish counterpart. “The conventional view,” writes Lilla, “is that both tried to reconcile classical philosophy with revealed law and thereby reform their societies. When Strauss discovered Alfarabi, he became convinced that this was just his exoteric, publicly accessible doctrine, and that, if his works are read more attentively, a subtler, esoteric teaching emerges.” In short, Alfarabi’s writings gave casual readers the impression that philosophy and revelation are compatible, while attentive readers perceived that they are not.

Moving further back in time, says Lilla, Strauss developed “an idealized picture of an

‘ancient’ or ‘classical’ philosophical tradition that was also esoteric.” He then tried to show that modern Enlightenment philosophy had domesticated “the truly radical nature of Socratic questioning,” and that “the genuine freedom of philosophy as a way of life” had been lost.

Strauss was a teacher as well as a thinker, and, as a professor in the United States in the second half of his life, he acquired a considerable following in American universities. In some places, Straussians’ “habit of forming dogmatic cliques with students and hiring one another” won them an unenviable reputation. Since Strauss’s death, younger Straussians “have turned their attention increasingly to Washington” and slowly adapted Straussian doctrine “to comport with neoconservative Republicanism.” Many of them, such as Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul D. Wolfowitz, have served in high government positions, while others, such as William Kristol, editor of *The Weekly Standard*, “play central roles in the neoconservative intellectual-political-media-foundation complex.”

Most of the charges made about a malign Straussian influence in the government “are patently absurd,” Lilla says. But some political Straussians are guilty of narrowing Strauss’s thought into hardened dogmas. “It is a shame that Strauss’s rich intellectual legacy is being squandered through the shortsightedness, provincialism, and ambition of some of his self-proclaimed disciples.”

Fallen Evangelicals

“The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience” by Ronald J. Sider, in *Books & Culture* (Jan.–Feb. 2005), 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, Ill. 60188.

It’s taken for granted in secular America that evangelical Christians are different in every way. The dismaying evidence from national polls is that they aren’t. “Whether the issue is divorce, materialism, sexual promiscuity, racism, physical abuse in marriage, or neglect of a biblical worldview, the polling

data point to widespread, blatant disobedience of clear biblical moral demands on the part of people who allegedly are evangelical, born-again Christians,” writes Sider, a professor of theology, holistic ministry, and public policy at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, near Philadelphia.