

Gottfried Takes on the Straussians

By [Allen Mendenhall](#)

Review of Paul Gottfried's [Leo Strauss and the Conservative Movement in America: A Critical Appraisal](#) (Cambridge University Press, 2012)

What Paul Gottfried writes about conservatism is never dull or conciliatory; it always signals – with strength and subtle wit – the most urgent controversies dividing and defining the conservative movement and so transfiguring the shape of American politics writ large. Gottfried is a self-proclaimed paleoconservative with a sweeping knowledge of intellectual history, and it's from that unique vantage that his latest book, *Leo Strauss and the Conservative Movement in America: A Critical Appraisal*, a thin hardback published by Cambridge University press, must be read.

Although ruthless and exacting in his criticism of Straussians, Gottfried cannot be called cantankerous. He is even at times reserved, and he goes out of his way to express gratitude to Straussians like Peter Minowitz and Ted McAllister, who provided feedback on his manuscript. Opponents of Gottfried who expect him to adopt the tone of a grouch or a whiner will, I hope, be pleased to discover that Gottfried instead has written a work of careful scholarship, as thoughtful in its denunciations as it is thorough in its analyses.

The notion that all Republican neconservatives are necessarily Straussians lately has come under attack by notable Straussians, including Michael and Catherine H. Zuckert. Yet Straussians aren't always ticketed as neoconservatives, and neoconservatives aren't always ticketed as Straussians, and at any rate the precision of these labels seems like an ancillary matter when the overlap of Straussianism and neoconservatism is readily apparent. One need only consider the names of Paul Wolfowitz, William Kristol, Allan Keyes, and John Podhoretz (son of Norman Podhoretz and Midge Decter) to gather the extent to which Straussian thought pervades the neoconservative establishment.

Neoconservatives may not have been pressed into service to carry out the teachings of Strauss, but Strauss has no doubt shaped neoconservatism. It is not too much to say that the neoconservative influence has made over the conservative movement, and that whatever Straussian ideas were alien to conservatism have gradually died out so that today there are few marks of variance between an ahistorical philosophy lionizing great men who stand for universal principles and, say, the Republican Party, which, strangely enough, seems wanting in both great men and principles. Gottfried is, to his credit, more cautious with terms than I have just been,

and he resists the temptation simply to conflate "neoconservative" with "Straussian," going so far as to draw important distinctions between them.

Gottfried's book begins with an extended biographical and theoretical portrait of Strauss – too detailed to summarize here – and moves deftly into an examination of the particulars of Straussian methodology. Along the way we learn about Strauss's Zionism and of the development of his belief that our American polity has receded from ancient and Platonic ideals. We learn that modern Straussians work mostly out of a tradition akin to Democratic Party liberalism, and that their expansionist, nationalist aspirations found no place in the mid-twentieth century American Right that was represented by an older, less triumphalist form of conservatism.

Straussians therefore made inroads with the New Left and others, like Norman Podhoretz and Willmoore Kendall, who had grown disenchanted with the radical, countercultural left. But Strauss – or "St. Leo," as Gottfried once refers to him in this context – appealed also to Catholic intellectuals committed to the teachings of Natural Law. Strauss's eloquent emphases on great men and the American Founding, moreover, charmed many conservatives who were already inclined to elitism and aristocratism. In this way Straussians gradually but thoroughly displaced Old Right conservatives and began to redefine conservatism in terms of equality and human rights, vague abstractions that lent themselves to nice-sounding mantras justifying American imperialism and military adventurism – and that, wonder of wonders, moved America further away from the vision of all but a few of the Founders.

A prevailing argument in this book is that Straussian politics and Straussian hermeneutics are inextricably tied so that, in Gottfried's words, "[a]ll beliefs in the Straussian worldview go together and are related to accompanying ones." In other words, the Straussian creed is "a complete package, and partial compliance is not an option." What makes this complete package troubling is that "the vital center of the Straussian movement has shifted toward direct political involvement and that those who count in that movement are increasingly political."

Straussianism is not merely a set of amorphous theories with no basis in political realities; it has practical, widespread consequences in the concrete, everyday world, and Straussians populate powerful think tanks, elite academic institutions, and mainstream political groups and organizations.

Despite his consistent tact and restraint, Gottfried doesn't always conceal his frustration. He seems especially upset with those Straussians undertaking to purge the conservative movement of "obscurantists" who "stress the particularistic, the ethnic, and the historically contingent," and who "scorn those heroes who put us on the road to becoming the crusading democratic people we are now." According to Gottfried, Straussians of different varieties have succeeded in casting these latter conservatives as fringe, dangerous right-wingers who ought to be defunded and marginalized. Yet these "dangerous" conservatives can claim a more traceable lineage to conservative thinkers and traditions, and they are not advocating for aggressive military action around the globe.

Republican-loving television pundits and Beltway conservatives knowingly or unknowingly take Straussian conceptions as a matter of course. But that has not always been so. There was a time,

not long ago, when conservatism had as its principles modesty and restraint, historical and geographical rootedness, a healthy pessimism and a tempered view of greatness. That brand of conservatism has been replaced by what Gottfried calls a "bellicose missionary spirit," "an expression of progressive militarism," and "a form of principled belligerence" like that of "French Jacobinism, Wilsonianism, and wars of communist liberation."

Gottfried seeks a return to a less militaristic and less bureaucratic conservatism, be it Burkean, Old Right, paleo, libertarian, traditionalist, or whatever, but he does not let his own preferences get in the way of description and clarification. He does allow himself the occasional sweeping claim, such as when he submits that although "what occurs in the classroom or at scholarly conferences has some value for them, it counts less for Straussians than being able to reshape a national party or being able to design a prodemocratic foreign policy." Yet even this claim, however grand it may appear at first blush, seems, on deeper levels, spot on. For have not the Straussians found homes in nearly all of the major conservative publishing outlets, from *The National Review* to *Commentary* to *The Weekly Standard*, and in nearly all of the influential conservative think tanks? Haven't Straussians managed to change the course of American public and foreign policy to fit within the sketchy outlines of a school more intent on constructing monuments for the future than on avoiding the failed exploits of the past?

I respect and admire Gottfried: his ideas are forceful yet judicious, and they require readers to become versed in a wide range of theories and thinkers outside the worn and mostly idiotic paradigms of American political parties and their sycophantic devotees. Whatever plurality one takes conservatism to consist in, one cannot accuse Gottfried of not knowing his subject. Gottfried has not only written about conservatism; he has *made* conservatism, fighting as he has for years the gradual encroachment of liberal democratic and managerial forces upon more decentralized and modest forms of government. His latest book could be devastating for Straussians. At the very least, it will force them to fine-tune and clarify their philosophy.

Gottfried ends on a hopeful note – that "libertarians may play a more prominent part in a future American right." Indeed they might. If the rising popularity of Ron Paul is any indication, libertarianism in general and Austrian economics in particular are gaining adherents and reaching broader audiences. Libertarians appeal to Gottfried because they are "not as keen as the Straussians are about human rights crusades, liberal interventionism, and backing up the Israeli government," and because libertarians "may start assaulting with some success the democratic welfare state in which Straussian intellectuals have found employment and have been able to shine, particularly in the Department of Education and in the National Endowment for Democracy."

As to these speculations on the future of conservatism, let us hope that Gottfried is not just insightful, but prescient.

February 21, 2012

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