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978-1-107-01724-5 - Leo Strauss and the Conservative Movement in America: A Critical Appraisal

Paul Edward Gottfried

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Leo Strauss and the Conservative Movement in America

This book offers an original interpretation of the achievement of Leo Strauss, stressing how his ideas and followers reshaped the American conservative movement. According to this study, Strauss and his disciples came to influence the establishment Right almost by accident. The conservative movement that reached out to Strauss and his legacy was extremely fluid and lacked self-confident leadership. Conservative activists and journalists felt a desperate need for academic acceptability, which they thought Strauss and his disciples would furnish. They also became deeply concerned with the problem of “value relativism,” which self-described conservatives thought Strauss had effectively addressed. Until recently, however, neither Strauss nor his disciples have considered themselves to be “conservatives.” Strauss’s followers continue to view themselves as stalwart Truman-Kennedy Democrats and liberal internationalists. Contrary to another misconception, Straussians have never wished to convert Americans to ancient political ideals and practices, except in a very selective rhetorical fashion. Strauss and his disciples have been avid champions of American modernity, and “timeless” values as interpreted by Strauss and his followers often look starkly contemporary.

Paul Edward Gottfried is Horace Raffensperger Professor of Humanities at Elizabethtown College. He is the author of numerous books, including *Conservatism in America: Making Sense of the American Right*, *The Strange Death of Marxism: The European Left in the New Millennium*, and *After Liberalism*.

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Acknowledgments

Professors David Gordon, Barry Shain, John Gunnell, Grant Havers, and Kenneth McIntyre all read parts of this text in earlier drafts and then sent me their well-considered judgments. Given that these readers were cited more than once, it seemed proper to let them see my handiwork before it went into print. Although the same courtesy was not extended to Peter Minowitz, who published a spirited defense of Strauss, I nonetheless received feedback when I sent him my critical observations. Peter acquitted himself so well in our vigorous exchanges that I suggest in my conclusion that he may be uniquely suited to overhaul what I criticize. Even more noteworthy from my perspective, Peter is the most affable and the least secretive professing Straussian whom I have met in fifty years.

Although only fragments of an early draft went to her, I did benefit from discussions with University of Pennsylvania professor Anne Norton. A graduate of seminars of Leo Strauss's students, Anne provided a central theme for my book, which came from her controversial study, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire*. According to this work, American (or Anglo-American) modernity was turned by Strauss and his disciples into the embodiment of all that is politically virtuous in the modern world. It became an actualized ideal that "political Straussians" view as a justification for an American revolutionary mission. This book elaborates on those insights.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Ted McAllister, of Pepperdine, who read an earlier draft of my book for Cambridge.

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In both his formal comments and later conversations with me, Ted offered helpful suggestions on how I might improve my manuscript. To his credit, he did not try to convert me to his interpretations, even as the author of a respected work on Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and the “revolt against modernity.” Ted encouraged me to think more deeply about *my* arguments, for the purpose of clarifying and strengthening them. Grant Havers did the same as a reader. Although presently at work on a thematically related book with its own spin, Grant aided me in my efforts to construct my arguments independently of his.

Strangely enough, I did not encounter John Gunnell, who pioneered critical evaluations of Strauss’s interpretive methods, until I had finished most of my first draft. I then discovered that Gunnell was already in the 1970s pointing explicitly toward my interpretation of the Straussian “Tradition.” After exposure to his writings, thanks to well-preserved copies that I received from his former graduate student Professor W. Wesley McDonald, I began to think more deeply about Strauss and his understanding of political texts. I was above all delighted to learn that my critical judgments did not proceed from a solitary mind. This discovery was further confirmed by my contact with a young scholar, Kenneth McIntyre. Like Gunnell, McIntyre reached some of my conclusions before I did and stated them with deep conviction and copious evidence. He also graciously shared his sources, from which I greatly benefited.

I must also thank my wife Mary and Professor David Brown for keeping me focused while I was still agonizing over this book. The composing did not come easily. I was repeatedly bedevilled by the need to reduce elaborate arguments and ponderous expositions to summarizing paragraphs. Each time I became depressed over what one reader noticed in an earlier draft was the “Byzantine structure” of my project, my wife and David raised my spirits in a timely fashion. Cambridge editor Lew Bateman performed a similar kindness, with his notes sent at regular intervals. Each time I was at the point of laying down my manuscript in weariness or despair, Lew asked for more of my work, until it was done.

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labors would have been even more painful. Cambridge University Press arranged for the index, and I am quite pleased with the results. I am also indebted to Jayashree Prabhu and her team at Newgen for managing the project; to the copyediting team at PETT Fox Inc in New York, who worked on the editing with noteworthy efficiency; to Anne Lovering Rounds at Cambridge University Press in New York, who arranged for the imaginative graphics for this attractively designed work; and to Barbara Degnan of BIM Indexing and Proofreading Services for creating an excellent index. The Earhart Foundation, which has financed my scholarship for many decades, furnished funds for the index and for other last-minute tidying up. Last but certainly not least, I should mention my son, Dr. Joseph D. Gottfried, along with Kathy Kelly and Kathy Hanna, whose computer skills enabled me to submit a relatively professional-looking manuscript. What I was technically incapable of doing, these helpers provided without complaint.

Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania