

ON THE NONSENSE ABOUT STRAUSS

by Andrew Schmidt

Since the onset of the latest Gulf War, a flurry of not-so-scholarly attention has been paid to the philosopher Leo Strauss. Numerous otherwise credible journalists have written persuasive pieces in leading news publications that identify the role “Straussians” are supposedly playing in the upper echelons of the Bush Administration, particularly in the areas of defense and intelligence. Interestingly, this is not the first Straussian revival to draw public attention. In the 1980s his name came up in scholarly debates over the intent of the founders and framers of the U.S. Constitution, and then again in more polemical debates over the significance of classical literature in higher education. The current revival centers largely on two themes Strauss is said to have addressed. One is the use of American power in world affairs, and the other is the role of deception in political policy-making.

To be sure, many notable neo-conservatives studied under Strauss, know his work intimately, and have certainly been influenced by his thinking. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz is but one example. On the surface, the attraction of linking Strauss with policy is understandable. Although Strauss avoided making direct remarks on political issues, he did present enough political commentary in his writings and lectures for his students to draw a connection between his theory of ‘natural right’ and the responsibility of liberal democratic governments to fight “tyrannical regimes.” In the turmoil of the Twentieth Century Strauss thought the democratic West – by virtue of its military might – offered the only hope of defeating communism and fascism, political systems that he saw as anathema to human freedom and advancement. Of course this is an oversimplification, and it casts Strauss as a Churchillian democrat when he was instead an avowed classicist and resolute critic of liberal democracy. Strauss’s preference for liberal democracy came largely by default because he felt

