

LEO STRAUSS AND THE AMERICAN POLITICAL RELIGION

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Two political theorists whose works define the recovery of classical political theory in the twentieth century were Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss. Virtually at the same moment when the Progressive movement was about to be given new life in American politics, Leo Strauss at the University of Chicago and Eric Voegelin at Louisiana State University and at Notre Dame were introducing motivated students to the mastery of classical Greek political philosophy. Their students had sought them out because they were disposed to reject the “value-free” social science that dominated American political science, and because many saw themselves as “conservative” and believed Strauss’s and Voegelin’s works represented a conservative political philosophy. More important, some had worked on Senator Barry Goldwater’s presidential campaign and hoped that the conservative movement he started would outlive his defeat in the disastrous election of 1964. Many would

become politically influential in American presidential administrations as political appointees.

Both Voegelin and Strauss carefully analyzed and rejected the fact-value approach of modern political “science”; Strauss for its rejection of natural right that led, he argued, to nihilism, and Voegelin for its rejection of our ability to know truth in the use of such terms as “value judgments.” “Neither classic nor Christian ethics and politics contain ‘value judgments,’” Voegelin wrote in the *The New Science of Politics*, “but elaborate, empirically and critically, the problems of order which derive from philosophical anthropology as part of a general ontology.”¹

Strauss’s and Voegelin’s criticism of value-free social science gave their students critical tools with which to understand why they had intuitively rejected the dominant behavioral approach of American political science. A few years later, when Berkeley, Columbia, and other major universities

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were convulsed by student demonstrators, a similar complaint was expressed by campus radicals that value-free social science was irrelevant. A post–World War II generation of young Americans on the political Right and Left were similarly motivated to reject a dominant American ideology. How they went about the rejection of value-free social science influenced American political life in the twentieth century. Students of Voegelin and Strauss chose classical scholarship. Their radical opposites chose the streets. Unlike their fathers’ World War II generation, the post–World War II generation didn’t accept the platitudes and falsehoods that passed for political wisdom in mid-twentieth-century America. Both, in their own way, were searching for truth. Strauss’s understanding that the questioning act of philosophy is an ascent to truth² and Voegelin’s definition of a philosopher as “the representative of a new truth in rivalry with the truth represented by society”³ evoked a responsive chord in the hearts and minds of their students.

Though Strauss and Voegelin addressed many of the same subjects, their approaches were dissimilar. Voegelin wrote on “problems in science, not on topics,”⁴ which included the differences yet similarities of reason and revelation, Christianity’s radical dedivinization of the world, and the nature of representation “as the form by which a political society gains existence for action in history.”⁵

In comparing Strauss with Voegelin, we observe that Strauss was more literally “classical” in the sense that his method of textual analysis worked within and with the concepts of his subjects. Thus Strauss’s examination of tyranny and tyrants, classical virtue, reason and revelation is rooted in the texts of the great classical philosophers, while Voegelin’s analysis of totalitarianism drew upon what he called the “Gnostic”

speculation of Joachim of Flora and, later, what he would call “Second Realities.”⁶

Both accepted “virtue” as morally valid and true, but Voegelin’s emphasis upon experience of transcendent divine reality vs. Strauss’s emphasis on reason—the former is all encompassing, the latter rooted in classical Greek philosophy “before Christianity”—is a difference of kind, not of degree.

Both understood that “transcendence,” as Strauss observed, “is implied in the meaning of political philosophy’s quest for the natural or best political order” (*Natural Right*, 15). The Greek natural philosophers (*physiologoi*) were motivated in a philosophical quest for the origin (*genesis*) of existent things (*ta onta*). That led to the judgment that the origin of nature (*physis*) was transcendent reality (*to on*) that is divine (*to theion*). The quest for the genesis of nature led Socrates to call the moon a stone and to reject the ancient cosmological concept of man as a plaything of gods who were, literally, the cosmos. The work of the natural philosophers enabled Plato to engage in dialogue in quest of the best regime and to outline a history of political forms commencing in a regime of the best men that declined ultimately into democracy and then tyranny. Strauss, working within classical terminology, believed that Plato’s and Aristotle’s analysis of tyranny, used with skill, was sufficient to reveal the depravity of Stalin or Hitler.

Voegelin agreed, in part, but saw in modern totalitarian ideologies serious spiritual disorders that could not be explained solely in Platonic or Aristotelian terms. Those disorders were equivalent to the alienation of the post-Christian Gnostics, Voegelin argued in *The New Science of Politics*, and he later came to see them related to the decline of Christianity evident in the Elizabethan revival of sorcery and magic. Underlying these totalitarian movements was a *libido*

dominandi that sought to replace reality with “Second Realities.”

Voegelin saw modern ideologies as distortions of Christian theological truth. Strauss was reluctant to, or not interested in, using theological tools in the assessment of problems of political order. Allan Bloom explained this by observing that Strauss “found that the teachings of reason are wholly different from and incompatible with those of revelation and that neither side could completely refute the claims of the other but that a choice had to be made.”⁷ Strauss’s decision to rely solely on reason implied a rejection of revelation or, at least, in the light of reason, its incomprehensibility. That seriously limited what ultimately became known as the “Straussian school” of political theory. The word *school* is, in some ways, an apt description of Strauss’s approach and resonates with the meaning of that term as it is used to describe the Scholasticism of the medieval “Schoolmen.”

Strauss, a scholar of classical Greek, consistently used the term “natural right,” which raises this question: Why not speak in the terms Aristotle used—“right by nature”?⁸ In only two sentences in *Natural Right and History* does Strauss use the classic phrase. “What is by nature right,” he observes, “can find its complete answer only in the conversation about the best regime” and “reason determines what is by nature right” (144, 7). This differentiates Strauss’s approach to his subject from Eric Voegelin’s. Strauss’s choice of the word *doctrine* to define his subject suggests that Strauss’s *Natural Right and History* is concerned with the development of a doctrine of “natural right” and not Aristotle’s examination of “what is right by nature.” That may explain why Strauss argued that a continuum exists between the ancient Greek philosophers and modern natural right theorists. There

is no continuity on the level of political theory, but there is continuity if classical natural right is treated as a doctrine. Such a doctrinal approach led Strauss to conclude that the Declaration of Independence was the defining intellectual form of the American regime. That mistaken view adversely affected the foreign policy of the United States in the post-Soviet era.

Strauss seems to have turned the discussion of why something is right everywhere but is always changing into a form of propositional metaphysics capable of discovering universal rules. Voegelin’s classical scholarship emphasized the experience of ever-changing immanent reality and experience of an unchanging transcendent divine reality, which enabled classical Greek philosophers to achieve what Voegelin called a “leap in being.” When such a leap occurs, Voegelin writes,

not only will the unseemly symbols be rejected, but man will turn away from the world and society as the source of misleading analogy. He will experience a turning around, the Platonic *periagoge*, an inversion or conversion toward the true source of order. And this turning around, this conversion, results in more than an increase in knowledge concerning the order of being; it is a change in the order itself. For the participation in being changes its structure when it becomes emphatically a partnership with God, while the participation in mundane being recedes to second rank. The more perfect attunement to being through conversion is not an increase on the same scale but a qualitative leap. And when this conversion befalls a society, the converted community will experience itself as qualitatively different from all other societies that have not taken the leap.⁹

Despite Strauss's lack of interest in, or his ignoring of, theology or biblical revelation, it is significant that Strauss's students report that he reengaged students who had placed some distance between themselves and the religions of their birth owing to estrangement or spiritual dryness.¹⁰ Eric Voegelin's works attracted American students and scholars for whom the Old Testament and the Gospels were more than a distant memory. Most carried the truths of Christianity "in their hips," to use a phrase of Willmoore Kendall, and most students of Voegelin at the University of Notre Dame remembered lessons from attendance at Catholic elementary and secondary schools. The heads of Strauss's and Voegelin's students were filled with ideas, not cannabis or LSD, and they watched with some interest the cultural decline of American churches, the destruction of higher education by a "New Left" in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the intellectual weakness of elected political leaders who ignorantly expanded the powers and programs of the American administrative state.

As for the conservative "movement," both Voegelin and Strauss were skeptical. Both had experienced "movements" in Europe that were destructive of the order of the West. That may explain Voegelin's criticism of Gerhart Niemeyer for holding an event at the Chicago meeting of the American Political Science Association in 1964 that featured writings by Voegelin that, he complained, could be described as having "a strong slant toward conservative politics."¹¹ What Leo Strauss may have thought of his student Harry Jaffa, whose scholarly gifts were used to craft speeches for Barry Goldwater, is an interesting question.

Carnes Lord wrote that though Strauss would have welcomed the resurgence of the conservatism of the 1970s (Strauss died in

1973), he would not have accepted "the fundamental outlook of the dominant elements in the conservative coalition that emerged in the 1980s,"¹² the era of the "Reagan Revolution."

If that is an accurate assessment, would Voegelin have been similarly disposed? Voegelin's position as a fellow at the Hoover Institution for more than fifteen years would have put him in close contact with many Hoover scholars who served in the Reagan administration. That familiarity would have shaped his understanding of what was happening in the United States that led to the election of Ronald Reagan. And Voegelin was a realist who understood that Communism represented a dangerous, deformed consciousness that placed civilization in peril.

Both Strauss and Voegelin deplored the politicization of scholarship, however. When I asked Voegelin about the scholarship of Hoover Institution fellows, Voegelin remarked, "Quite good, if your purpose is to work for the next American president."

A sentence in William Galston's essay in *Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime* suggests that Voegelin's and Strauss's economic views may also have shaped their views of American politics. Galston, who served as a political appointee in the Clinton administration, writes, "In many respects, after all, the social value of work exceeds its market value."¹³ Galston's rejection of unfettered markets is considered heresy by some contemporary American conservatives, but, for European political theorists like Voegelin and Strauss, it is likely that "capitalism" would seem ideological and indicative of a closed system they would have rejected. We should remember also that even Frederick Hayek in the *Constitution of Liberty* was at pains to explore how a free economy can ensure "a given minimum of sustenance

for all.”¹⁴ If given a choice between unfettered free markets and Friedrich Hayek’s approach, both Strauss and Voegelin would most likely have chosen Hayek.

Strauss’s and Voegelin’s experience in Austria and Germany prior to and after World War II would have disposed their students to be critical of “movements.” And Voegelin’s political theory demanded that the political theorist avoid imposing the dogma of partisan politics on the philosophic quest. Yet, despite their protests, the works of Strauss and Voegelin came to be identified with a conservative movement. And for many movement conservatives, Voegelin and Strauss were their theoretical guides.

Unfortunately, Strauss’s influence on the American conservative movement does not have a happy ending, and this is due to his fascination with what he calls “natural right.”

Like Voegelin, Strauss taught classical Greek philosophy with courses focused on the dialogues of Plato and the works of Aristotle. The students of both Strauss and Voegelin were thus rooted in these classics, and their later careers were devoted to teaching these works and, for some, writing analyses of the Greek natural philosophers and the philosophy of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Many prominent scholars in the “Straussian school” contributed to a broader understanding of classical philosophy. However, Strauss’s influential *Natural Right and History* revealed a mistaken assumption that the Declaration of Independence rooted the American regime in natural right doctrine.

To a large extent, the social disorder of American society today, the general loss of community, the decline of authority, and the disdain that our intellectuals have toward America and all things American, as well as a common acceptance of relativism that is deepening into nihilism, begin in a “natu-

ral right” interpretation of the Declaration of Independence.¹⁵ Strauss’s belief that the American regime via the Declaration of Independence is rooted in natural right doctrine follows from his assumption that “in spite of their opposition to each other, they [Hobbes and classic philosophy] are motivated by fundamentally the same spirit. Their origin is the concern with a right or sound order of society whose actualization is probable.” Treating classical philosophy as equivalent on a moral or theoretical level to modern political theory is troubling. Strauss observes, for example, that Marlowe’s statement that Machiavelli held that “there is no sin but ignorance . . . is almost a definition of the philosopher” (*Natural Right*, 190–91, 177).

Machiavelli a philosopher?

And the “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality” of Rousseau, Strauss writes, is decidedly the work of a “philosopher” (264). Rousseau, whose writings inspired the Terror of the French Revolution, a philosopher?

And that brings us to this question. If, as Strauss proclaimed, the philosopher is the representative of truth, how can the speculations of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau be considered philosophic? In the course of his interpretation of the doctrine of natural right, Strauss works *within* the systems of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau as if they were engaged in inquiries equivalent to the inquiries of the Greek natural philosophers, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and not wholly different. While Strauss certainly sees Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau in continuity with Plato and Aristotle, his final chapter in *Natural Right and History* takes up the “Crisis” of modern natural right. One could infer from his argument that while the Enlightenment figures are philosophers, their philosophy is problematic. But Strauss’s lack of, or weak, criticism of the “moderns” and his silence in the face of the modern philosophers’ rejection of

Christianity places Strauss in the ambiguous position of an interpreter of ideas who selectively leaves out those ideas he doesn't want to confront.

Strauss is critical of Max Weber's "fact vs. value dichotomy" and observes that there occurred a "politicization of philosophy in the seventeenth century" (39, 34), but Strauss does not seem to want to acknowledge that Thomas Hobbes, Machiavelli, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau engaged in a reversal of classical philosophy that is the hallmark of this "politicization" of philosophy. The modern concepts of these thinkers, the State of Nature, the Law of Nature, the Social Contract, and, of course, Natural Rights are not symbols of experience complementary to, or rooted in, the philosophic quest of classical philosophy. They are replacements for that quest, ideological concepts that lead us into a new, modern era that is, frankly, arrogant and dismissive of philosophic truth.

Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau can be called "modern" in the same sense that Petrarch viewed the conversion of Rome to Christianity as a "dark age"¹⁶ and revised the Augustinian revaluation of history by asserting that pre-Christian Rome was an age of light and glory.¹⁷ Had Strauss not made the common mistake of treating revelation as "supernatural" (144)¹⁸ he might have been disposed to see the equivalence of experience that engendered classical philosophy and revelation, and, by contrast, that the ideas of Hobbes are not "motivated by fundamentally the same spirit."

While Strauss was pursuing the argument that a doctrine of natural right can be traced from classical philosophy to the modern era, other philosophers were dealing with actual problems of political order. That, I think, distinguishes Strauss from Voegelin and from many of his contemporaries. Strauss's

approach in *Natural Right and History* seems irrelevant in the light of the very important analyses of the origins of totalitarianism in Albert Camus's *L'Homme révolté* (1951) and Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). They were doing what classical political philosophers do, examining problems in science. Strauss was doing what modern theorists do, developing topics. Although this approach was theoretically deficient, Strauss's analysis of a topic, as opposed to problems of political order, had value for the development of a politically acceptable "school" that had significant consequences as members of that school gained influence in academe and American politics.

This essential difference in the approach between Voegelin and Strauss has generated heated discussions among scholars influenced by them. *Natural Right and History* begins, for example, with an assertion that the American nation was "conceived and raised" in the propositions of the Declaration of Independence.

For scholars of American political theory influenced by Eric Voegelin, such as Willmoore Kendall, Ellis Sandoz, George Carey, Melvin Bradford, Stanley Parry, and historians who are appreciative of the works of David Hackett Fischer, Strauss's statement is a common but one-sided interpretation of the Declaration of Independence.

What the Declaration actually meant to those Americans infused with the "Spirit of '76" cannot be inferred solely from the Engrossed Copy of the document.¹⁹

When it came time to articulate why we were engaged in a rebellion against the English Crown, Thomas Jefferson was assigned to write the first draft of what came to be known as a Declaration of Independence. And although the first draft of the Declaration of Independence composed by Jefferson

was modified by the Committee on Style of the Continental Congress, some Straussian-influenced scholars treat the Engrossed Copy as if it had not gone through an important process of editing from which we can learn much. The Committee on Style, in fact, “caught” most of Jefferson’s Enlightenment notions and softened them so as not to offend the dominant Christian culture of colonial Americans in 1776. Nevertheless, despite that evidence, these interpreters of the Declaration pursue an argument that takes them from Thomas Jefferson to Abraham Lincoln and promotes a redemptive purpose of the American regime.

The Constitution of the United States, not the Declaration, however, is the governing document of the American regime and, before the Constitution was ratified, an unwritten constitution had developed over more than 180 years. The American colonies, collectively and independently, contributed to the development of a unified consciousness of America’s uniqueness and, ultimately, its difference and separateness from the mother country. Although that culture was shaped by waves of emigration from England, the colonies’ principal motivation was religious estrangement from the British establishment. That ensured that the experience of Christian religion and faith would be a permanent aspect of the American political order. Ultimately, that spirit led to resistance to both the king’s and Parliament’s claim of the power to rule the colonies without their consent.

One hundred and eighty years of colonial history, the experience of freedom, the vastness of the American continent, and the practices of varieties of Christian religion developed into an unwritten constitution and culture of folkways that erupted in a rebellion. That unwritten constitution became “ensouled” in the “Spirit of ’76,” defined our War of Independence, and, ulti-

mately, determined the framing of the Constitution of the United States. The imposition of a redemptive mission upon that historical record was a later, ideological development of humanist intellectuals influenced by European nationalist uprisings of the 1840s, liberal Unitarianism, and German idealism transported to the United States in the form of American transcendentalism.²⁰ That “prophetic-utopian” interpretation of the Declaration is, quite simply, based on ideology, not historical evidence.

The heroic efforts of citizen soldiers and the leadership of George Washington and his generals are worthy of any country in world history. Lexington, Concord, Bunker Hill, Quebec, White Plains, Brandywine, Saratoga, Monmouth, Valley Forge, Trenton, and, finally, Yorktown resound with the cries of men willing to sacrifice everything. Few, if any, examples in the histories of this struggle and the earlier colonial era, captured by some of America’s finest historians, support a reductive, Enlightenment interpretation of the War of Independence.²¹

There was, frankly, much more going on before the first shots were fired at Lexington and Concord than the sound of the turning of pages of Locke’s *Second Treatise*. American colonists’ growing comprehension of their existence “apart from” their relationship with England gradually increased as the American continent grew in territory, wealth, and self-sufficiency. The historian Fred Thompson’s study of the French and Indian War also suggests that the American rebellion, like many rebellions, was inspired by pride and resentment at the manner the American “colonials” were treated by what now were seen as “the British.” Many “colonials” who fought alongside the British against the French walked away from that experience having decided never again to fight as allies.

Strauss's influence on the development of what some call the Straussian school of political theorists is extremely important for political theory in American higher education and in the councils of government. That influence seems to have two sources. One source is Strauss's admirable and influential mastery of classical philosophy. Many of his students have contributed significantly to our understanding of ancient political theory, and some recent scholarship on the Progressive movement by Straussian scholars affiliated with the *Claremont Review* is critical for our understanding of the growth of an all-intrusive administrative state in American political life.²² However, the other, unfortunate effect of Strauss's influence is due to making the "doctrine of natural right" a part of the philosophic discussion of the best regime. Thus the best regime is committed to the actualization of natural right, and natural right is seen as integral to its definition. That, of course, is contrary to the original meaning of the classical theory of "right by nature."

Strauss's examination of natural right "doctrine" would have been seen by Voegelin as a philosophic "derailment," a term Voegelin used to express the eclipse of philosophy grounded in experience. Derailment can take several forms. In the period of transition of classical philosophy to the speculation of the Stoics, philosophy was deformed into "doctrine." The symbols that Plato and Aristotle created to articulate their experience of reality were evocative of original experience of the sacred. But once philosophy ceases to be a medium of experience, Voegelin writes, "a new intellectual game with imaginary realities in an imaginary realm of thought, the game of propositional metaphysics, has been opened with world historic consequences that reach into our own present."²³ My explanation of

this process in *The Development of Political Theory* is still valid:

The Stoic dogmatization of philosophy, though destructive in its ultimate consequences, had the immediate effect of preserving the insight of Classical philosophy against the inevitable defect that philosophy requires "philosophers" if it is to be preserved. In the absence of persons of the rank of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle to continue the search for truth, and of circumstances conducive to the contemplative life, the dogmatization of philosophy at least preserved the symbols of philosophy. But the ravages of dogmatism can be contained only so long before they take pernicious forms. For Voegelin, the concept "ideology" represents the final turn in the decline of philosophy when the symbols no longer articulate original experience of theophany, but become the means by which theophany is eradicated from public and personal consciousness.²⁴

The derailment of Strauss's classical scholarship in his doctrine of natural right has had negative consequences for American foreign policy.

Robert Kagan's important analysis of the development of America in *Dangerous Nation* contains themes consistent with Strauss's natural right doctrine. American foreign policy, according to Kagan, was "revolutionary" as a consequence of the struggle for independence from Britain. From that struggle, the Founders "invented a new foreign policy founded upon the universalist ideology that the Revolution spawned." Contrary to the interpretation of the War of Independence by conservatives that the rebellion sought to preserve the rights of Englishmen, Kagan argues that the colonists

fought to secure “universal natural rights, granted by God and enjoyed by all men regardless of nationality, culture and history.” “The Declaration of Independence was at once an assertion of this radical principle, a justification for rebellion, and the founding document of American nationhood.”²⁵

In this context, Kagan sees the leaders of the War of Independence as idealists “committed to a set of universal principles.” Though statecraft is necessarily focused on the national interest, Kagan argues that the foreign policy of a liberal republic cannot be divorced from principles of liberalism and republicanism. One of the claims of a foreign policy fashioned in this mode is that America never engaged in conquests to gain territory, and our own Civil War was not fought “for interest.” It was “a crusade for the good of mankind.” All our wars have been selfless quests for “freedom and natural rights” (*Dangerous Nation*, 57, 72, 102, 267, 44).

As with most universal theories, there is some evidence for all of Kagan’s claims. Most interesting, for example, is his mention that Thomas Jefferson conferred with the Marquis de Lafayette to draft the French Revolution’s Declaration of the Rights of Man (109). But the story Kagan weaves from the American Founding to the Civil War too often stretches the historical record in order to make a point. There is, of course, an extreme strain of “moralism” that tends toward self-righteousness that is part of our heritage as Americans. And if Kagan had begun *Dangerous Nation* with the events leading up to the American Civil War, he would be making a better argument.

From Abraham Lincoln to Woodrow Wilson, a new strain of political religion enters American history, gains strength, and shapes twentieth- and twenty-first-century American history. And although Woodrow

Wilson’s political religion has become the most powerful force in American political life, Abraham Lincoln also contributed to the acculturation of American citizens to political religion by utilizing biblical language in his construction of the meaning of democracy.

Some of Lincoln’s religious language comes, Kagan suggests, from the Second Great Awakening. Lincoln, too, rejected self-interest as the sole guide in foreign policy. In that respect, Kagan’s claim that a “universalist ideology” alone shaped our polity is overwhelmed by other evidence he provides that a pervasive moral sense is evident throughout our history. Universalist ideology and moral sensitivity are not the same. Kagan duly cites evidence of the rise of a uniquely American “moralism.” The first annual address of John Quincy Adams, for example, states that government is instituted for “the progressive improvement of the condition of the governed.” American “moralism” was also evident in public reaction to the war between Christian Greeks and the “Muslim Turks.” A similar public response occurred when Louis Kossuth, leader of the uprising of Hungarians against the Hapsburgs in 1848, sought the support of the American people. And Kagan notes that Abraham Lincoln offered a resolution supporting the universal right of self-determination at a Kossuth meeting in 1852. The Second Great Awakening, Kagan writes, aroused moral outrage in the North against the South. And in the War against Spain, the motivating force was not our universalist liberal ideology but rather our compassion for the horrible suffering of Cuban citizens forced into “reconcentration” camps (261, 151, 169, 255, 256, 194, 391).

Americans are easily motivated to redress a moral wrong and not solely by the complex of ideas that make up the American political religion.

That political religion, fully developed in Wilsonian idealism,²⁶ overwhelms attention to the moralistic motives of our intervention in World War I, the “Crusade” that described our engagement in World War II, the military defense of the “right to self-determination” of the South Vietnamese that Lyndon Johnson used to justify the war in Vietnam, the Balkan intervention by the Clinton administration, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq of the George W. Bush administration. Even today, calls for interventions around the world to protect women are made from a sense of moral right, not merely to advance feminist ideology.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the coalition of forces within the Republican Party lost an anchor that tethered them to a common foreign policy. Anticommunism was the glue that held together libertarians, Evangelical and millenarian Christians, “country club” Republicans, the remaining members of the Eisenhower and Rockefeller wings of the Republican Party, supply-side economists, Reagan Democrats, traditional political conservatives, and anticommunist liberals, who came to be called neoconservatives. Absent that threat to our national survival, the Republican-Conservative coalition could not hold, nor could it act effectively. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, George H. W. Bush was unable to design a unifying vision for his administration. When faced with a recession, President Bush broke his word, raised taxes, and cut the only ties he had to economic conservatives. In the presidential contest of 1992, forty-seven years after the end of World War II, the electoral power of the “Greatest Generation” had weakened with age, and a younger candidate, William Jefferson Clinton, defeated the last president who had fought in the Second World War.

A political vacuum existed that was filled by a neoconservative “Statement of Principles” issued by the Project for the New American Century in June 1997 and signed by twenty-five Republican leaders.²⁷ Project staff and directors included William Kristol and Robert Kagan.

Though admirable in its patriotic sentiments and its call for the revival of “a Reaganite policy of military strength and moral clarity,” in hindsight, the “Statement of Principles” of the Project for the New American Century was used to advocate, and slavishly justify, the imperial policies of President George W. Bush. In the wake of that administration’s policies, the nation’s financial resources were exhausted, the lives of yet another generation of young Americans were sacrificed in wars committed to nation building, new and costly welfare programs were instituted that expanded the administrative state and endangered constitutionally protected rights by empowering a Department of Homeland Security to execute the Patriot Act, which militarized the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the National Security Agency, and the Central Intelligence Agency. Neoconservative influence thus destroyed the hard-won, limited-government “brand” of the Republican Party.

In 1997, though not today, we might have missed the ideological tone of the Project for the New American Century to “shape a new century,” to maintain a strong military that can meet “future challenges,” the need to meet our “responsibilities of global leadership” and pursue a role “in maintaining peace and security in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East,” and the need “to shape circumstances before crises emerge.” The “Statement” ends with a call to embrace a “cause.”

Anyone familiar with nineteenth-century ideologies and the manifestos with which

they announced their arrival in the world can sense the ideological character of the Project for the New American Century. Theirs is not a call to determine carefully the American national interest, anticipate and prepare to respond to challenges to that national interest, and assess our ability to engage in future wars. Manifestos are not grounded in philosophic reason but rather in propositional reasoning motivated by a “cause.”²⁸ The pathology of a “cause” was evident in President George W. Bush’s call, in his second inaugural, for the “expansion of freedom in all the world.”

The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.

America’s vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one. From the day of our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth. Across the generations we have proclaimed the imperative of self-government, because no one is fit to be a master, and no one deserves to be a slave. Advancing these ideals is the mission that created our Nation. It is the honorable achievement of our fathers. Now it is the urgent requirement of our nation’s security, and the calling of our time.

So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of demo-

cratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.

These “insights,” shared with the American people at George W. Bush’s second inauguration, are derived from the Declaration of Independence:

When the Declaration of Independence was first read in public and the Liberty Bell was sounded in celebration, a witness said, “It rang as if it meant something.” In our time, it means something still. America, in this young century, proclaims liberty throughout all the world and to all the inhabitants thereof. Renewed in our strength, tested but not weary, we are ready for the greatest achievements in the history of freedom.

Today, as a consequence of this uniquely American political religion, the American nation is financially at risk, overextended by commitments to the self-determination of other countries, and so weakened intellectually and militarily that challenges to our national interest from Iran, China, and Russia lack a convincing response.

Is there a solution?

Only if American statecraft can return to its roots in the national interest, if politicians replace the political religion of “democracy” with serious consideration of our national interest, and we educate our statesmen to be representatives of America and not global citizens. †

- 1 Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 11–12.
- 2 Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 124. Subsequent references to this book will be given parenthetically in the text.
- 3 Voegelin, *New Science*, 1.
- 4 Letter, Eric Voegelin to Richard Bishirjian, July 20, 1977.
- 5 Voegelin, *New Science*, 1.
- 6 Sandoz, Ellis, *Published Essays 1966–1985*, vol. 11, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); “On Debate and Existence,” 51. Voegelin translated the term “another reality” in Robert Musil’s *A Man without Qualities* into English as “second reality.”
- 7 Allan Bloom, “Leo Strauss,” *Political Theory* 2, no. 4 (November 1974): 381.
- 8 *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1177b33–35, cited by Strauss, *Natural Right*, 82n1.
- 9 Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, vol. 1, *Order and History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), 10.
- 10 Hadley Arkes, “Strauss on Our Minds,” in *Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime*, eds., Kenneth L. Deutsch and Johan A. Murley (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Pubs., 1999), 86. I am thankful to Dr. Mark Blitz and Dr. Carnes Lord for bringing this collection of essays to my attention.
- 11 Thomas Hollweck, ed., *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin: Selected Correspondence 1950–1984* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 472.
- 12 Carnes Lord, “Thoughts on Strauss and Our Present Discontent,” in Deutsch and Murley, *Leo Strauss*, 414.
- 13 William Galston, “Cornell Days,” *Ibid.*, 435.
- 14 F. A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 259.
- 15 Fr. Stanley Parry, a student of Willmoore Kendall’s at Yale and a member of the faculty in the government department at Notre Dame, sensed the misdirection of political theory in Strauss’s *Natural Right and History* and questioned whether natural right theory is a true theory of man. February 26, 1965, meeting of the Philadelphia Society, Chicago, Illinois. Audio recording may be accessed at www.phillysoc.org at the “Past Meetings” tab.
- 16 Ephraim Emerton, *The Beginnings of Modern Europe: 1250–1450* (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1917), 464, 480.
- 17 Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renaissances in Western Art* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 10.
- 18 In Book VI of *City of God*, St. Augustine comments on Varro’s *Antiquities* in which Varro divided theology into mythical (fabulous), natural, and civil. This led St. Augustine to collapse these three into two, natural and civil, and to add a third, supernatural, category of theology. The unfortunate consequence of this distinction was to relegate revelation to a supernatural, irrational place that reason cannot enter.
- 19 Richard Bishirjian, *A Public Philosophy Reader* (New York: Arlington House, 1978), 32.
- 20 Richard Gamble’s important scholarship in his essay, included in this symposium, explores this aspect of how an internationalist civil religion had developed long before the American Civil War.
- 21 In addition to David Hackett Fischer’s *Albion’s Seed* and *Washington’s Crossing*, see also Ernest Lee Tuveson’s *Redeemer Nation*; Fred Anderson’s *Crucible of War: The Seven Years’ War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754–1766*; and Walter McDougall’s *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776*.
- 22 John Marini and Kenneth Masugi, *The Progressive Revolution in Politics and Political Science: Transforming the American Regime* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005). The *Claremont Review* also maintains an archive of research on the Progressive movement: <http://www.claremontinstitute.org/index.php?act=page&cid=244&pid=203>.
- 23 Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, vol. 4, *Order and History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 43.
- 24 *The Development of Political Theory. A Critical Analysis* (Dallas: Society for the Study of Traditional Culture, 1978), 229–30.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 41; Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation* (2006; rpt. New York: Random House, 2007), 40–41. Further citations of this book will be given parenthetically in the text.
- 26 Richard Bishirjian, “Wilson, Croly and the American Civil Religion,” *Modern Age* 23 (Winter 1979): 33–38.
- 27 Signers of the “Statement of Principles” are Elliott Abrams, Gary Bauer, William J. Bennett, John Ellis “Jeb” Bush, Dick Cheney, Eliot A. Cohen, Midge Decter, Paula Dobriansky, Steve Forbes, Aaron Friedberg, Francis Fukuyama, Frank Gaffney, Fred C. Ikle, Donald Kagan, Zalmai Khalilzad, I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby, Norman Podhoretz, J. Danforth Quayle, Peter W. Rodman, Stephen P. Rosen, Henry S. Rowen, Donald Rumsfeld, Vin Weber, George Weigel, Paul Wolfowitz. Though the Project for the New American Century has disbanded, its basic documents are archived on the Web: <http://web.archive.org/web/20070810113753/http://www.newamericancentury.org/statementofprinciples.htm>.
- 28 Richard Bishirjian, “Origins and End of the New World Order,” *Modern Age* 46 (Summer 2004): 200.