

The Secret Kingdom of Leo Strauss

by Tony Papert

Just a decade ago, a friend and I first read through Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, and were quite attracted to him. Why? For one thing, his opposition to the counterculture seemed to come from the heart: For example, he described how, as a college professor, he would take his own recordings with him up into his students' dorm rooms, to get them to turn off their rock music and listen to Mozart with him. Bloom also passionately denounced the fact that the universities were teaching nothing; so do I. On the other hand, I also saw that I had disagreements with Bloom, but I was going to give him the benefit of the doubt: Maybe they would just turn out to be misunderstandings.

My friend and I intended to approach Bloom to join us in Lyndon LaRouche's campaign. But first, I wanted to find out more.

As anyone who read it will remember, *Closing of the American Mind* always left a peculiar mental aftertaste, no matter where you happened to close the book. In the midst of other matters, Bloom would slip in emphatic, unexpected statements, apparently off the subject, never followed up, but which would stay with you for days afterwards, just for that reason.

I still remember two of them. Bloom wrote that at Socrates' trial, there were men present who wanted him to be acquitted; they were the "gentlemen." What did he mean by that word "gentlemen"? I had never heard anyone use it in this context before, but Bloom just let it drop after that one sentence, and never picked up the thread again. In another nearby location, he wrote that Socrates was accused of not believing in the gods of the city, and inventing other gods. Notice, wrote Bloom, that he never denied the charge. But I remembered, as I thought, that Socrates *had* denied the charge; and, prompted by my puzzlement at Bloom's remark, I found the words in Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, where Socrates did deny it.

And yet this Bloom was supposed to be a Greek scholar and a translator of Plato. Just what was he trying to get at? What did he mean?

Strauss vs. Socrates

When I learned that Allan Bloom had been a follower of the late Professor Leo Strauss of the University of Chicago, I decided I had to find out what Strauss had said. My only knowledge of Strauss at that time, was through another friend, whose mother had taken his course at the New School in New York, where Strauss had taught from 1938 to 1948. She had

marvelled at his command of ancient Greek. For the rest, all that she would remember was his close attention to the texts.

Leo Strauss, born in 1899 to observant Jewish parents in Kirchhain, Germany, in the province of Hesse near Marburg, had lived in the United States from 1938 until his death in Annapolis, Maryland, in 1973. He had written at least 16 books. Most of them were long, and had such uninteresting-sounding titles as *The City and Man*, or *Natural Right and History*. I decided I would read Strauss's book *Socrates and Aristophanes*, both because I was interested in the subject, and also because I now recalled that Bloom had given me an impression, in one of those dark asides of his, that Aristophanes' lampoon of Socrates in his play, *The Clouds*, had been at least partly truthful, while I knew it to be a lie.

Wading into the beginning of Strauss's prefatory material to his *Socrates and Aristophanes*, it all seemed simple, artless, and totally dull. Aristophanes wrote a play about Socrates. This play, *The Clouds*, is important—essential, in fact—to understand the issues surrounding Socrates. And—here it is! Strauss lands us smack into his own translation of the play. A very pedestrian translation, with the additional burden of lengthy stage directions inserted by Strauss, and even directions for what happens offstage, which somehow overwhelm the dialogue.

Well and good. At length, having made it through *The Clouds*, I was back to Leo Strauss again. As important as this play is, he writes, it cannot be understood apart from its context. Ten other plays of Aristophanes have survived. And—here they are! In dry-as-dust translations by Strauss, complete with his lengthy stage directions. I put the book away, and with it my project to read long books of Leo Strauss.

There must be another approach.

Now, I had a friend with a classics background, with whom I was frequently in touch, who was then leading a long-running seminar on Plato's *Republic* among some of the volunteers for Lyndon LaRouche, who was himself in prison at the time, having been framed up in a rerun of Socrates' trial at Athens. I learned somehow that my friend, the seminar leader, had studied under the Straussian Stanley Rosen.

I had always thought that this Plato seminar was a bit of a mixed bag. Some parts, which I think stemmed from my friend's own study of the history of Athens, were quite useful. Others were unexplained and eerie: such as, for example, his insistence that Socrates "seduced" his hearers. But more to the point was an indefinable, ominous sort of quirkiness which overhung every discussion.



The willful intellectual strategy of emphasizing Plato, but turning him into a “secret fascist,” characterized Harvard Prof. Allan Bloom, intellectual mentor of the Pentagon’s chicken-hawk leader Paul Wolfowitz. Bloom himself was a leading disciple of the late German-born University of Chicago professor Leo Strauss, whose followers now dominate Bush Administration strategic and legal “thinking.”

Eventually it became clear to me, that Strauss, through Stanley Rosen, had made the same sort of imprint on my friend, that Strauss’s teacher Martin Heidegger had made upon Strauss himself. In the insightful account of Shadia Drury, “Nothing made a greater impact on Strauss than Heidegger’s manner of studying a text. He was totally struck by Heidegger’s analysis of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*; he thought that Heidegger’s approach laid bare the intellectual sinews of a text; and it was unlike anything else he had ever seen or heard. Strauss’s reaction is not unusual. Heidegger’s style of teaching was reputed to have a totally mesmerizing effect. He has been accused of a certain “mystical bullying.” The goal was not so much understanding as initiation in a mystical cult. This is precisely why Karl Jaspers’s letter to the Denazification Commission advised against Heidegger’s return to teaching after the war. The gist of Jaspers’s letter was that Heidegger’s style was profoundly unfree, and that the students were not strong enough to withstand his sorcery. The youth are not safe with Heidegger until they can think for themselves, and Heidegger is no help where that is concerned. On a much smaller scale, the same can be said for Strauss.” [Drury, 1997, p. 77]

Kabbalism in Annapolis

We also have imprints in the LaRouche movement of Saint John’s College, in Annapolis, Maryland, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, with its “Great Books” program, another offshoot of the University of Chicago.

I had the chance recently to speak with a relative of one of our members, who is in effect an evangelist for Saint

John’s; soon he was giving me thumbnail sketches of each of the courses there. When he got to a class on a Plato dialogue, he said that the teacher had stayed up all night, counting each word in the dialogue, so that she could show her class the central word: word number 25,000 out of 50,000 words, for example. The notion is that the central word in this sense, points to the central idea of the work.

“It sounds just like Strauss!”, I burst out. Yes, he said, Strauss is influential in the Greek classics program at Saint John’s.

The influence is probably broader. Already in the 1950s, Saint John’s in Annapolis was headed for years by Strauss’s lifelong friend Jacob Klein. Strauss retired from Chicago in 1967, and spent a year at Claremont Men’s College in California. Then, from 1969 until his death in 1973, Strauss was scholar-in-residence at Saint John’s at Annapolis.

Now, was it an accident that Strauss’s books, especially his later books, were unreadable? No; I came to see that it was deliberate. The purpose was to ensure that the huge majority of readers will “tune out,” after finding nothing but some familiar-sounding exhortations, such as advice to be moral, patriotic, and god-fearing. This is largely how Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind* was read during its ten weeks on the best-seller list: as a pile of salutary exhortations. The mass of people will find nothing but pabulum. But, the few “intelligent young men”—and it’s always “men” or “boys”; never “women” or “people,” but “men” or “boys”—the few intelligent young men will be intrigued by these *obiter dicta*, or these fragmentary remarks, which are almost always off the subject—and they’ll say, “Now, what is that really all about? I’ve got to get into it; I’ve got to understand.” And, then, they’re taken aside, and taught in private, individually.

The case is the same as that of the police infiltrator, who, whenever anything important comes up in a meeting, says, “I have to talk to you about it after the meeting.” He will never discuss anything of significance in a meeting, but only one-on-one, because he is habitually telling different things to different people.

‘Without Fear and Without Hope’

By far the best book on Strauss is Shadia Drury’s 1988 *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*. It may be that part of its excellence is related to her awareness that there is a sense in which no woman could be a Straussian. In fact, Strauss said that no woman could be a philosopher. But, for many of the bright young boys, or men, their purpose for studying with Strauss was to become “philosophers.”

Illustrative of Strauss’s method is Shadia Drury’s report of a debate between two long-time leading Straussians—Thomas Pangle and Harry Jaffa—which ran in the *Claremont Review* from Fall 1984, through Summer 1985, and continued in *National Review* on Nov. 20 and 29, 1985. Pangle had implied that for Socrates (i.e., for Strauss), moral virtue had no application to the really intelligent man, the philosopher.

Moral virtue only existed in popular opinion, where it served the purpose of controlling the unintelligent majority. Elsewhere in the debate, Pangle implied that for Strauss, philosophy had disproved religious faith. As the fight continued, Pangle said that Strauss had characterized America's distinctiveness as "modern," which for the Straussians is one of their worst terms of abuse.

Harry Jaffa found "Pangle's interpretation completely foreign to his own understanding of his teacher and friend of 30 years," in Shadia Drury's summary. "Jaffa observes that such a vision of Strauss is Nietzschean, and he denounces Pangle for having perverted the legacy of Leo Strauss." [Drury 1988, page 182]

How is this contradiction possible? As Drury says, "Strauss taught students such as Jaffa and Pangle different things." [Drury 1988, page 188] The esoteric, or supposedly secret teaching which was inculcated into Pangle, Bloom, Werner Dannhauser, and many others, including, reportedly, Bloom's protégé Paul Wolfowitz, was indeed pure Nietzsche. In fact, the version which Pangle represented in that 1984-85 debate, as outrageous as it may have seemed to Jaffa, was greatly watered down. From Nietzsche to Leo Strauss, only the names have been changed, as they say. To begin with, what Nietzsche called the "superman," or the "next man," Strauss calls the "philosopher."

The philosopher/superman is that rare man who can face the truth: that there is no God; that the universe cares nothing for men or mankind; and that all of human history is nothing more than an insignificant speck in the cosmos, which no sooner began, than it will vanish forever without a trace. There is no morality, no good and evil, and of course any notion of an afterlife is an old wives' tale.

In a eulogy for a colleague, Strauss said, "I think he died as a philosopher. Without fear, but also without hope."

But the great majority of men and women, on the other hand, is so far from ever being able to face the truth, that it it virtually belongs to another species. Nietzsche called it the "herd," and also the "slaves." They require the bogeymen of a threatening God and of punishment in the afterlife, and the fiction of moral right and wrong. Without these illusions, they would go mad and run riot, and the social order, any social order, would collapse. And since human nature never changes, according to Strauss, this will always be so.

It is the supermen/philosophers who provide the herd with the religious, moral, and other beliefs they require, but which the supermen themselves know to be lies. Nietzsche said that his supermen were "atheistic priests," and Strauss pretends that their lies are "noble lies." But they do not do this out of benevolence, of course; charity and benevolence are mocked by Nietzsche and Strauss as unworthy of gods and godlike men. Rather, the "philosophers" use these falsehoods to shape society in the interest of these "philosophers" themselves.

Now, the philosophers require various sorts of people to serve them, including the "gentlemen," that word which had

struck me earlier, when Bloom had used it in speaking of Socrates' trial. Rather than the "esoteric," or secret teachings, the future "gentlemen" are indoctrinated in the "exoteric," or public teachings. They are taught to believe in religion, morality, patriotism, and public service, and some go into government. Think of former Education Secretary William Bennett and his *Book of Virtues*. Of course, along with these traditional virtues, they also believe in the "philosophers" who have taught them all these good things.

Those "gentlemen" who become statesmen, will continue to take the advice of the philosophers. This rule of the philosophers through their front-men in government, is what Strauss calls the "secret kingdom" of the philosophers, a "secret kingdom" which is the life's objective of many of Strauss's esoteric students.

Hiding From the Truth

Now the peculiarities I had found in Allan Bloom's book, as well as in the Plato seminar I mentioned, resulted not only from the Nietzscheanism of Strauss and Bloom, but equally from Strauss's insistence that the truth must be hidden, which Nietzsche did not share in that form.

It is because the truth would destroy society and the philosophers alike if it became known, that Strauss said that Plato and the ancient philosophers, like Strauss himself, wrote in a

Leo Strauss Chronology

1899: Leo Strauss was born to observant Jewish parents in the German town of Kirchhain, near Marburg, in the province of Hesse.

C. 1916: At the age of 17, Strauss was converted to "straightforward, political" Zionism.

1917: Strauss began his university education, but it was interrupted by his conscription for military service as a translator in occupied Belgium.

1919: Strauss resumed his university education at the University of Marburg.

1920: Strauss first met his three lifelong friends Jacob Klein, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and the emigré Russian, Alexander Vladimirovitch Kojevnikov (1902-68), later known as "Kojève," who had just left Russia to study under Karl Jaspers in Heidelberg.

1921: Strauss received his PhD. His dissertation, which praised the irrationalism of F.H. Jacobi, was supervised by Ernst Cassirer, the successor of Hermann Cohen as leader of the Marburg neo-Kantian school. By then, Strauss has also studied at the Universities of Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, and Hamburg. Later, Strauss said that Nietzsche so dominated and bewitched him between his

kind of code, whose true meaning only disclosed itself to the wise. If the vulgar happened on their books, they would find only the familiar salutary myths about the rewards of virtue, the punishment of vice, and the like.

Strauss gives an example from Al-Farabi, another of his esoteric writers, of how one may tell the truth in words, only to deceive. In Drury's paraphrase, "The pious ascetic was well known in the city for his abstinence, abasement, and mortification, and for his probity, propriety, and devotion. But for some reason he aroused the hostility of the ruler of his city. The latter ordered his arrest, and to make sure he did not flee, he placed the guards of the city gates on alert. In spite of this, the ascetic managed to escape from the city. Dressed as a drunk and singing a tune to cymbals, he approached the city gates. When the guard asked him who he was, he replied that he was the pious ascetic that everyone was looking for. The guard did not believe him, and let him go." (Drury, 1988, pages x-xi.)

No surprise, then, that the Allan Bloom whom I and others had thought we had seen through the pages of his *Closing of the American Mind*, was not the real Allan Bloom at all. You can obtain a truer idea of his real beliefs, through the extracts from his "Interpretive Essay" on Plato's *Republic* (see box). Indeed, the real Allan Bloom was also, among other things, a promiscuous homosexual whose life was cut short by AIDS.

When he recognized that he was dying, he charged his close friend, the Chicago University novelist Saul Bellow, to write what has been called a "literary monument" to Allan Bloom, the *roman à clef* titled *Ravelstein*. It is a true-to-life biography. Bellow may justify his having suppressed some facts about himself, by the need to keep his friend Bloom in the foreground. Otherwise, only names and minor details have been changed. Bloom is "Ravelstein," Strauss is "Davarr" (Hebrew for "word"), and Bellow himself is "Chick" or "Chickie."

The Straussian Network

From a professor with a taste for luxury, but without the means to afford it, *The Closing of the American Mind* made Allan Bloom an overnight multi-millionaire. Japanese royalties alone were in the millions. Bellow's book begins with a fabulously expensive, all-night dinner party thrown by Bloom for perhaps two dozen people, including Bellow, in the Crillon, which Bloom had chosen as the best hotel in Paris. Bloom and Bellow wake up at two o'clock the next day, and go window-shopping through expensive Paris shops. Eventually, they pick up a \$5,000 yellow jacket, tailor-made for Bloom. Then, in a cafe, the jittery Allan Bloom accidentally pours an espresso down the front of his new jacket. Bellow squirms, and tries to assure his friend that the porter at the Crillon will know how to repair his jacket, but Bloom just

22nd and 30th years, that he literally believed everything that he understood of him.

1922: Strauss studied under Martin Heidegger, who impressed him deeply.

1920s: Strauss researched and wrote principally on Jewish topics. He also met several times with Vladimir Jabotinsky, the fascist leader of "revisionist" Zionism, whom David Ben-Gurion later called "Vladimir Hitler."

1925-31: Researcher and writer for the Academy for the Science of Judaism in Berlin. Between 1925 and 1930, Strauss wrote his first two books, which were on Spinoza.

1931: Applied for a Rockefeller Fellowship. Strauss' research on Thomas Hobbes brought him in contact with the future "Nazi Crown Jurist," Carl Schmitt. Schmitt was shown Strauss' unfinished book on Hobbes. Strauss wrote a review of Schmitt's little book, *The Concept of the Political*, which so pleased Schmitt that he got it published in the same journal which published the book. Schmitt's recommendation obtained for Strauss a Rockefeller Fellowship to study in France and England.

1933: In Paris, Strauss married a recently divorced German Jewish woman, Marie (Mirjam) Bernsohn, whom he had met in 1930, and acquired a stepson.

1934: Strauss and his family moved to London. He studied Hobbes in the British Museum.

1937: Appointed Research Fellow in the Department of History at Columbia University, New York, Strauss left his family behind in Britain.

1938-48: Brought onto the graduate faculty of the New School in New York, on the basis of a strong recommendation, and a subsidy, from Harold Laski. Strauss' family joined him in New York in 1939.

1948-73: Hans Morgenthau, acting chairman of the Political Science Department at the University of Chicago, brought Strauss over to President Robert Hutchins' office. Half an hour later, Hutchins had appointed Strauss a full professor, with a salary greater than anyone else in the department.

1953: Strauss was visiting professor at Berkeley. Offered a tenured position there, he declined.

1954-55: Visiting professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Visited Germany.

1956: Strauss suffered a heart attack.

1967: Strauss retired from Chicago at the end of the academic year.

1968-69: Professor of political science at Claremont Men's College in California.

1968-73: Until his death, Strauss was Scott Buchanan Distinguished Scholar in Residence, St. John's College, Annapolis, Maryland.



Leo Strauss' own mentor was the man known as the "Crown Jurist of the Nazis," Carl Schmitt, who drafted the emergency laws by which Hitler justified his seizure of dictatorial power.

laughs uncontrollably.

Instead of a telephone, Bloom's Chicago apartment featured what was in effect a custom-made, private telephone switchboard. He spent much of his time sitting at the center of the spiderweb getting telephone calls. With this device he could have a number of people on hold, while presumably conferencing others in ad hoc or preplanned discussions. And Bloom, who died in 1992, was one of the first to carry the equivalent of a cell-phone, so that he could get his important calls anywhere.

One incident describes a call from Wolfowitz in Washington to Bloom's device during the Gulf War in 1991. Wolfowitz told Bloom that the White House will announce the next day, that they're not going on to Baghdad. Bloom denounced them as cowards.

And what he did was discuss politics, manage the careers of his brood of acolytes, talk about their love lives, and about the other guy's love life, and match people up. Indeed, he helped break up Saul Bellow's marriage, while finding him a beautiful young literary assistant, a student of Bloom's, who then fell in love with Bellow and married him.

Remember that Strauss graduated 100 PhD's. Bloom graduated many. They in turn graduated others, and so forth. By now, the fourth generation has graduated. And there was a role for each one, whether they were esoteric or exoteric, "philosophers" or "gentlemen," or dissidents or whatnot. Remember, for instance, that a coveted academic job requires 10-20 unreservedly positive recommendations, from others who already have such jobs. Now, this is one thing the Straussians will always do for each other, regardless of what might seem some very serious disagreements. And this academic "buddy system" stretches into the government, through the increasing proliferation of think-tanks which bridge between the two. This was the bridge crossed by Wolfowitz and many other Straussians.

Now, a year and a half after Sept. 11, the "secret kingdom" seems at last at hand, or perhaps it is already here. Something similar probably appeared to Nietzsche through the syphilitic ravings of his final days.