
Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire*,
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The Ass and the Lion

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I.

Some years ago, Yale University Press introduced a series called "Fastbacks." Although Anne Norton's book does not come with that label, it has some of the defining characteristics of the genre: relatively short, and composed with evident speed so as to respond to a timely issue. (Perhaps one should say "haste" rather than speed, given the author's failure to check the spelling of names she mentions like Bruno Bettelheim, Michael Malbin, and James Ceaser, the title of Burke's address on Conciliation with the Colonies, the school where Stephen Salkever teaches, and other details.) In fact, Norton reports that rather than proposing the book to the publisher, she was persuaded to write it by a Yale editor who had conceived it (xiii). So streamlined is the book that, unusually for the product of an academic press, it is devoid of footnotes. For evidence of her contentions, Norton relies on personal reminiscences, rumors or gossip she has heard, and occasional quotations of phrases (without page citations) from a few Straussian (or quasi-Straussian) books.

Despite her title, Norton explains that her concern is not with Leo Strauss (1899–1973), the great (and controversial) political philosophy

scholar, nor even with his “students,” i.e., “political theorists interested in his work,” but rather with Strauss’s “disciples,” “the people who call themselves Straussians,” even though those two categories have “some overlap.” While sometimes departing from Strauss’s own views, she maintains, the Straussians—notably such individuals as Paul Wolfowitz, deputy secretary of defense during President George W. Bush’s first term of office; Bill Kristol, television commentator, publisher of the *Weekly Standard*, and codirector of the Project for a New American Century; Leon Kass, chairman of the President’s Council on Bioethics; and the late Allan Bloom, author of the 1987 bestseller *The Closing of the American Mind*—“have made a conscious and deliberate effort to shape politics and learning in the United States and abroad” (6–7). It is because America is now at war, and Straussians like Wolfowitz and Kristol have achieved so much “power” in that context, that Norton concluded that she needed to write about them (xi).

Norton, who teaches political science at Penn, judges herself well-equipped to discuss the Straussians because she studied with some of the most prominent of Strauss’s students at the University of Chicago—including Kass, Joseph Cropsey, and Ralph Lerner—without ever becoming a Straussian (thus bearing witness to her intellectual independence). By Norton’s account, Cropsey and Lerner were remarkable teachers who “took your breath away with their honesty” (23). In addition, Cropsey and Kass were extremely generous with their time to her. But some of her teachers had an underlying agenda: they aimed to “seduce” her into becoming one of their “disciples” (25–26, 32). While Norton was able to resist their siren song, many of her classmates, hungry for “masters,” succumbed to it, forming a “cult” whose members “learned to like the taste of their [non-Straussian] professors’ blood” (13, 25). They formed “truth squads” who asked questions of “professors they disliked or distrusted...not to hear the answers but as a form of disruption and intimidation,” aiming, at least in their victims’ eyes, “to silence...all who disagreed with them,” like “intellectual brownshirts.” (Some students even went to the length of reading quotations from Strauss’s *Natural Right and History* to the professors they victimized, an obvious brownshirt tactic.) According to those professors, Strauss himself, during his years at Chicago, failed to discourage such behavior, and almost succeeded in an endeavor “to establish complete control over the department” (45–46).

Thus in Norton’s account the ostensible commitment to academic freedom of some of Strauss’s former students (including Bloom) who went on to teach at Cornell and resisted that university’s surrender to

armed black militants in 1969 “is marred by their past and future tolerance of tactics of intimidation on the right, by their employment of such tactics at Cornell,” and by their disgraceful (“totalitarian”) treatment of their colleague Clinton Rossiter, whose company they shunned after he endorsed the surrender. (According to Norton “Bloom and his allies” felt that those who were demanding black studies “were threatening them” by challenging their privilege of teaching “as they chose”; she does not mention the militants’ radio broadcast of death threats against them, which compelled at least one faculty member to move his family out of town for safety, as well as requiring a black student who had openly dissented from the militants to move out as well.) Underlying their rejection of the black students’ demands was a narrowly Eurocentric perspective that would have denied students the opportunity to study writers like W.E.B. DuBois (50–53). (Indeed, when Norton began studying contemporary French theorists like Lacan and Derrida after leaving Chicago, her Straussian teachers “sent messages” through her friends “that they were ‘very disturbed’ and ‘very unhappy,’” exhibiting their fear that she had “gone over to the dark side of the Force.” They were determined to “enforce” a “lack of knowledge” of postmodernism among their pupils [99–100]. Their narrowness was akin to the intellectual “laziness” of Bloom’s friend Saul Bellow, whose quip about the absence of a “Fijian Tolstoi” Norton refutes by mentioning Hegel and Lao Tzu to demonstrate the presence of great works in all cultures: 30.)

Bloom, to whom Norton devotes an entire chapter, exemplified the worst of the Straussian vices. His *Closing*, which even “the more philosophic Straussians ignored” or “deprecated,” was “meretricious,” just like his “loud suits.” Bloom held his Cornell students to a “conservative orthodoxy,” and even made his disciples (according to a friend of Norton’s) scurry to pick up pennies he had tossed down the hall. Once he moved back to Chicago to teach, Bloom “refused to grade the papers of a student who “had ‘listened to other professors’” (57–61; despite the quotation marks, Norton provides no source). But worst of all, this “defender of youthful innocence, family values, and traditional morality” was a hypocrite. While “the targets of Bloom’s attack were too kind, too scrupulous, or perhaps too puritanical” to mention it, Bloom was a “flamboyantly queenly” homosexual who reportedly held “houseboys in sexual servitude” and sponsored “homosexual rites and rituals” including “orgiastic toga parties.” Norton herself says she doesn’t “believe” the latter reports—although unlike Bloom’s “targets,” she feels obliged to repeat them (62). At the same time, she remarks Bloom’s “misogyny,” and the spectacle of “tiny little men with rounded shoulders” among Bloom’s

students proclaiming the superiority of the male sex, while others “with soft white hands...delivered disquisitions on manliness”—perhaps as a way of “warding off the evil eye of sexual rejection,” to say nothing of “the more troubling fact that women could read” (63).

Considerations of space dictate a briefer account of Norton’s remaining charges. It must suffice to observe that she believes the Straussians’ elitist, antidemocratic, antimodern, and hypocritical training to underlie their present project, now that they have attained positions of high political influence in the Bush administration and outside it, of waging wars without end (143), becoming “enforcers of virtue” like the Iranian mullahs (137), promoting “trickle-down economics,” and imprisoning and deporting aliens they dislike (172). According to one sociologist Norton consulted, “the world is currently divided between the followers of Leo Strauss and the followers of Sayyid Qutb” (the founder of contemporary Islamic “fundamentalism” whose writings reportedly exercised a decisive influence on Osama bin Laden), an observation she deems “worth exploring” (110). Moreover, even though America is far safer now (Norton believes) than it was when FDR said we had nothing to fear but fear itself, Americans generally (whether owing to Straussian influences she does not say) “believe they see enemies on every side,” using that paranoia as an excuse for policies that endanger Americans’ “lives, their liberties, and their honor” (158–59).

Although Norton has heard that there were once “liberal and left Straussians,” she reports that “those species have become extinct...in the aftermath of the cosmic events of the late sixties” (161–62). She depicts William Galston, a Straussian who served as campaign adviser to the presidential candidates John Anderson and Walter Mondale and then as domestic policy adviser to Bill Clinton, and was a forthright opponent of the Iraq war, as having “moved a short distance to the left, but farther than a good Straussian was permitted to go”; but then again, she remarks, the Democratic party to which he gained entry “had moved considerably to the right” as well, perhaps partly excusing his wandering from the reservation (18). Another prominent Straussian, Michael Zuckert, “took to the streets” to protest the Iraq war according to Norton—but he was only choosing a different path to “the same [unspecified] ends” (52). (Only a writer with a peculiarly academic or baby-boomer view of the world, we might observe, could in 2004—well after the fall of the Soviet empire, and following the events of 9/11—describe the turbulence of the sixties as “cosmic.”)

While Norton's assorted denunciations of contemporary, ostensibly Straussian policies read like an anti-Bush diatribe composed by Howard Dean or George Soros, she charges that the Straussians have actually betrayed authentic conservatism. "The American conservatism that embraced Strauss," she maintains, "had a clear commitment to certain simple tenets," revering "custom and tradition," believing in noblesse oblige, resisting change, distrusting "abstract principles, grand theories, utopian projects," having high regard for "education and the arts," and above all advocating "small government" (162). American conservatism was "largely an English tradition," deriving from the ideas of the eighteenth-century "country" party, but reformulating them into the Jacksonian slogan that "that government is best that governs least" (168). (The nostalgia Norton expresses for the good old days of American conservatism, when "Americans of wealth and power prided themselves on having a country life: hunting, fishing, riding" [168] could bring tears to the eyes of Simon Legree, if not to his slaves: the connection of Jacksonian limitations on Federal power to the slave interest goes unremarked by Norton.)

As late as the Reagan administration, this sort of conservatism, guided by "the limits of custom and precedent" and directed at "keeping things as they were" and "as their ancestors had been" "flourished." (Perhaps Norton should have run this observation by one of her sociologist friends before publishing it.) But "all this changed" at the turn of a new century, when the 9/11 attacks became an excuse for vastly expanding government's powers, "the old regard for manners" was undermined by individuals like Rush Limbaugh, and "respect for the ancient tenets of just-war theory and the norms of international order were [*sic*] set aside," in favor of a "strong state" that aimed to "make trouble' in the world" (171–79).

The Bush administration's so-called war on terror is in reality, according to Norton, a "*jihad*" that constitutes America's own "Sicilian expedition"—harboring a doom analogous to that which the ancient Athenians met. Defying the sobriety of Burke and the warnings of "hard-headed realists in the field of international relations," the neoconservative advocates of "expansive internationalism," including Straussians like Kristol, aim at "universal dominion." Only a few lonely voices, like that of West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd, remain to scold us for our disregard of the U.N. Security Council as well as our own Constitution (188–200). Today, American foreign policy is driven by an anti-Muslim bigotry that fantastically supposes that Muslims "are involved in shadowy global conspiracies" (212, 216; who woulda thunk it?). Of course, even back in her Chicago days, Norton recalls, Straussians made Arabs and

Muslims “the targets of unrestrained persecution” (210) (even while Strauss’s pupils Muhsin Mahdi and Ralph Lerner [225] were teaching Arabic political philosophy to future scholars of the subject like Charles Butterworth and Miriam Galston). A similar bigotry is evident in Straussian Harry Jaffa’s description of Yasser Arafat’s Palestinian Authority as a gangster-ridden, Nazi-like regime, and his representation of Islam as “the religion of the sword,” a claim the falsity of which is immediately apparent once one realizes that the literal meaning of “Islam” is “peace” (211). (Then again, *Pravda* meant “truth.”) In a manner that Norton curiously claims is reminiscent of “long-dishonored” anti-Semitic texts, two neoconservative (but non-Straussian) writers, David Frum and Richard Perle, have even called for “violence in the name of defense” against the sources of Islamic terrorism! (211).

II.

Given the anecdotal and rumor-based character of Norton’s account of Straussians’ personal behavior and characteristics, it is difficult for the reviewer to offer a comprehensive assessment of this aspect of her book, other than to observe that her description of the atmosphere that surrounded Strauss and Bloom, speaking as one who studied with both (at Chicago and Cornell, respectively) during the 1960’s, and knows a number of Bloom’s, Kass’s, and Cropsey’s students from the 1970’s, bears only the foggiest resemblance to reality. Since there were only two Straussians in Chicago’s political science department other than Strauss himself (Cropsey and Herbert Storing), and the department numbered more than twenty members, Strauss was never in a position to achieve “control” of it (though a particularly resentful chairman who took office in 1965 may have leveled such accusations: I heard him imply such things in a remarkably vituperative address to the assembled graduate students that fall, warning that no “factions” would be tolerated on his watch). (He himself might have profited from a rereading of *Federalist* no. 10’s account of how the consequences of the endeavor to stamp out faction are likely to be worse than the “disease” they purport to remedy.)

Far from representing himself as a champion of “conservatism,” Allan Bloom publicly boasted of never having voted for a Republican until Ronald Reagan’s 1980 presidential candidacy; as of the mid-1960’s he was still arguing that Adlai Stevenson would have made a better president than Eisenhower, and his two favorite national politicians at the time were the moderate Democratic senators Scoop Jackson and Ed Muskie. At Cornell, he was a friend and admirer of Frances Perkins, FDR’s Secretary of Labor and a fellow resident of the Telluride House. In 1976, demonstrating how philosophic

wisdom does not always guarantee sound judgment, he even espoused the presidential candidacy of Jimmy Carter. (And he ridiculed the notion that the great books he taught constituted a fixed “canon” of “sacred texts” [Norton, 30–32], a term taken from the discourse of religion rather than philosophy: see his “Western Civ,” in *Giants and Dwarfs* [Simon and Schuster, 1990], 13–31.) Anyone still inclined to regard Bloom as a political conservative should read the liberal journalist Jim Sleeper’s essay “Allan Bloom and the Conservative Mind” (*New York Times Book Review*, September 4, 2005)— though Sleeper himself exaggerates Bloom’s “mistrust” of “capitalism” and democracy, as distinguished from the belief that the university needed a certain insulation from these dominating tendencies of American life. Finally, regarding Bloom’s one-time colleague, the pathetic Clinton Rossiter, one will find a more reliable account of the circumstances that apparently led to his suicide in Alison Lurie’s *roman à clef* *The War Between the Tates*; suffice it to say that (to paraphrase Mae West) the Straussians had relatively little to do with it.

As for other assertions that I have been able to check, Michael Zuckert assures me that although he publicly opposed the Iraq war, he never “took to the streets” on behalf of that cause. Paul Wolfowitz, by his account, did not “condemn” the Vietnam war (51), only the way it was being conducted (see the interview with him in the *Cornell Alumni News*, 2004). Joseph Cropsey, whom Norton credits with giving her the “fullest and most critical account” of the so-called “truth squads” (45), denies knowing of, let alone describing, any such groups (as distinguished from sometimes overeager or partisan individuals among the younger graduate students, whose behavior he disapproved of: see below). Rather than opposing the study of African-American political writers, Herbert Storing was already teaching a seminar on African-American political thought in the late 1960’s and published two important articles on Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass, respectively; in the early 1970’s he published one of the first readers on the political thought of black Americans. Also in the 1960’s, another Straussian, Howard Brotz, published the first comprehensive one-volume reader on the subject, originally titled *Negro Social and Political Thought* (Basic Books). Other Straussians of the next generation, such as Diana Schaub, Peter Myers, and Leslie Goldstein, have continued this area of research. (It would not have been difficult for Norton to ascertain these bibliographic facts. But so little an acquaintance does Norton have with Straussian teaching and scholarship that she absurdly claims that Straussians read only a few books “over and over,” including only three Platonic dialogues but not the *Republic*, and Aristotle’s *Ethics* but not his *Politics*: 33.)

As for Derrida, the distinguished Straussian Catherine Zuckert devotes a considerable portion of her important book *Postmodern Platos* (University of Chicago Press, 1996) to a largely sympathetic account of his thought. She has never reported to me any warnings from her teachers not to undertake such a dangerous exploit. (And both Cropsey and Kass firmly deny ever having sent such messages to Norton. Being well acquainted with both men, I would have been amazed had they done so. Aside from the fact that neither individual was known for seeking such control over his students, Norton's vanity seems to induce her to exaggerate considerably their need of her "discipleship.") Finally, having known a number of Harvey Mansfield's Ph.D. students of various political orientations, I can attest that he by no means mandates that anyone who studies with him "be a conservative" (8).

One of the other anecdotes Norton recounts to illustrate some Straussians' laughable attempts at "seducing" her into joining their "*epigoni*" when she studied at Chicago concerns Kass's offering to let her read an unpublished Biblical commentary he had drawn upon in class only "in his office and under his eye," while Cropsey, by contrast, readily lent her a copy (25–26). Since (as Norton acknowledges) the commentary was subsequently published, what Kass's caution must have reflected was clearly not some cultish secrecy, but rather the author's own request not to allow an unpublished manuscript to circulate until the author had had the opportunity to put it into final form. (Norton's years of teaching in the Ivy League have presumably familiarized her with this custom.) (Robert Sacks's profound commentary on the book of Genesis, titled *The Lion and the Ass*, originally appeared in a series of issues of this journal, before being published as a book by the Edwin Mellen Press.)

Beyond this, what Norton describes as graduate-student Straussian "truth squads" might be said to have existed at Chicago (though not under that name, to my knowledge, and not with any sort of organization). In fact, the present author was a one-man truth squad all by himself. In other words, I and (I assume) some others were the sorts of eager youth who were eager to display our wit and learning at the expense of certain professors whose courses we were required to take for the sake of our comprehensive exams – professors who, if truth be told, were not infrequently dogmatic, dull, and narrow. We were, in other words, the types of youth who (as Allan Bloom once observed of me) got Socrates into trouble. It is lamentable that Norton, who presumably is aware that boys will be boys (there were rather few female graduate students in political science at all during the mid-'60s, and they did not characteristically engage in "boyish" behavior), uses the fact of our

misbehavior to justify the refusal of many political science departments to hire Straussians (12–13). (Norton’s hyperventilating account of the “truth squads” “derives from Strauss’s old enemies” as well as from “his students” [45]; while she does not identify those students, the subsequent recollections of those who regarded Strauss as an “enemy” and his students as “brownshirts” can hardly be trusted as a reliable source.)

III.

While it is inherently impossible to refute all the unsourced gossip Norton purveys on the basis of alleged personal experiences or the reports of her friends, one can assess her credibility by examining her use of written sources. The following samples do not inspire confidence. She mocks Carnes Lord for attributing “considerable courage” to Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf for collaborating in the American invasion of Afghanistan following 9/11 (131–32), when all that Lord says is that Musharraf displayed such courage “by cracking down on Islamic extremism in the army and the mosques and instituting major reforms of the madrassas” in his country (Lord, *The Modern Prince* [Yale University Press, 2003], 136). She attributes to Lord a proposal for instituting a governmental “moral police” to supervise the activities of American college students and a “constant supervision of opinions” (137–38), when his discussion simply concerns the need for universities to cooperate with the government in tracking *foreign* students “who are in the country illegally” or are pursuing courses of study like nuclear physics that have the potential for military use against the U.S. (Lord, 139). She likewise accuses Lord of praising Singapore’s prime minister and constitutional architect Lee Kuan Yew for resisting Western liberalism, i.e., “an emphasis on rights and the individual” (133), when Lord reports noncommittally on Lee’s championing of “so-called Asian values” as an alternative to liberal individualism, warns of the dangers of “the autocratic temptation” for statesmen like Lee or De Gaulle, and praises Lee for making greater provision than De Gaulle did “to create the institutions that would enable him to withdraw gracefully from power while preserving his larger political legacy of nation building and constitutional construction” (Lord, 101, 104–5).

According to Norton, Lord “can’t find a good word to say about the redoubtable Maggie Thatcher” because she was a “manly” woman (64). But in fact, Lord praises Thatcher’s “extraordinary leadership skills” as well as her resistance to nonsensical, “faddish approaches to education.” His only criticism concerns her confrontational and sometimes humiliating conduct towards her cabinet, in contrast with Ronald Reagan’s gentlemanly

behavior towards his associates and avoidance of personal confrontation, admirable tendencies that nonetheless caused “much unnecessary infighting and confusion within his administration” (Lord, 6, 10, 138). And when Lord warns of the danger that “unassimilated minorities” may pose in an age of terrorism—even while acknowledging that such minorities as “practicing Muslims” may also “have legitimate grounds for complaint about the West today”—and urges a greater endeavor to inculcate liberal constitutional principles in the citizenry as Lincoln did, rather than submit to the demoralizing ideology of multiculturalist relativism (Lord, 227–28), Norton reads this as an attack on Hasidim and “the rambunctious family of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*” as “enemy aliens” (138).

Another example of Norton’s misuse of quotations is her attribution to Robert Kagan (not a Straussian to my knowledge) and William Kristol of the aspiration for the U.S. to “make trouble in the world,” when what they actually say in their prescient 2000 book *Present Dangers* (Encounter Books) is that we should “set about making trouble *for hostile and potentially hostile nations*,” such as the regimes of Saddam Hussein and the North Korean tyrants, “rather than waiting for them to make trouble for us” or their neighbors and our allies (*Present Dangers*, 7 [emphasis added]). (Had we overthrown Saddam at the end of the Gulf War, destroyed North Korea’s nuclear facilities in the 1990’s, and intervened against the Taliban before 2001, how many of our and the world’s subsequent troubles might have been avoided?) Elsewhere, Norton attributes to Strauss himself thoughts that he is paraphrasing from the book by Hermann Cohen that he is reviewing, and which it is unlikely Strauss shared (216–17).

As for Frum and Perle’s book *An End to Evil: How to Win the War Against Terror* (Random House, 2003), which Norton represents as a manifesto of “violence” and a “blood libel” against Islam comparable to “long-dishonored” anti-Jewish texts (211), the reader may be interested to learn that other than citing the potential need to strike at terrorist camps or North Korea’s nuclear weapons facilities, their chief recommendations concern such matters as strengthening democratic movements within Muslim dictatorships like Iran, telling the truth about (and endeavoring to end) Saudi financing of Wahabbist *madrassas* around the world, and cutting off aid to the North Korean tyranny. When it comes to the profiling of potential terrorists, they dismiss focusing on “people with Muslim-sounding names or Middle Eastern facial features” as “a divisive and humiliating waste of time,” arguing that “what investigators need to profile is not *ethnicity*” but “*behavior*” (80–81,

their emphasis). They also urge an increase in American aid to the Indian subcontinent (including Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka), focusing on the improvement of girls' education and the teaching of "marketable skills" instead of Islamist indoctrination, and a "comprehensive free trade agreement" with the U.S., contingent on these countries' signing the same agreement with one another (262–63). Somehow, none of this seems redolent of traditional anti-Semitism or of anti-Islamism, as Norton insinuates. Did she take the time to read beyond the dust jacket, and the one quotation she cites (211) in which Frum and Perle allude to widespread support among "mainstream" Muslim groups in America for terrorist organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah? (See Frum and Perle, 83–93, for the authors' documentation of this observation, and 94 for their recommendation that we "honor moderate and patriotic Islam as an important and respected element of American life.")

The skill at careful reading that Norton claims she acquired at Chicago (29–31) is not much in evidence in this book. Indeed, after a critic of the *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics* that Herbert Storing edited in 1962 charged that the authors were attacking "pipsqueaks" rather than leading exponents of "behavioral" political science, as Norton reports, one of the prominent social scientists being criticized in the book understandably responded that "he preferred his Straussian enemies to his defenders" (44). Unfortunately, Norton misses the point of the remark—that the Straussians typically read the writings that they criticize with greater care, and take them more seriously, than the Straussians' critics do. As for Norton's own approach, it must be noted that misquotation is a far more egregious offense when one avoids even providing references to the pages one is borrowing from.

One must also note the deficiencies in Norton's convoluted account of the relation of Strauss's thought and contemporary American foreign policy to "conservatism." While Strauss was undoubtedly a practical conservative in contemporary political terminology—that is, he (unlike Bloom) generally favored policies advocated by the more conservative wing of the Republican party, and in his best-known book, *Natural Right and History*, gave qualified support to the "idea" of natural right—he consistently emphasized that philosophy can never itself be conservative, since its quest is for what is by nature true and good, as distinguished from the pre-philosophic horizon that identifies the true and the good with merely conventional standards. (Strauss's repeated references in that book to natural right as a "problem" obviously belie Norton's claims that Straussians view nature as "simple and certain, stable and secure" [76]—unless she believes that they somehow

overlooked these references. See Richard Kennington, “Strauss’s *Natural Right and History*,” *Review of Metaphysics* 35 [1981], 57–86.)

Without any textual support, Norton attributes to the Straussians a simplistic equation of the natural with the traditional which any acquaintance with their scholarship would belie. Contrary to her imagining that Straussians teach that “it is natural for men to have authority over women, and the final word on finances” [!] (77), Straussian scholarship on Aristotle, among other authors, has shown the error of attributing such prejudices to him – which caused all too many readers to deny his relevance to a modern, liberal regime. (See, e.g., Mary Nichols’s fine commentary on the *Politics, Citizens and Statesmen* [Rowman and Littlefield, 1992].) While calling Kass’s book *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfection of Our Natures*, “elegant and charming,” Norton mocks Kass’s allusion to “the wisdom of repugnance” (regarding the potential scientific reconstruction of human nature through such means as cloning) by citing Dr. Seuss, who showed how easy it can be to overcome an aversion to green eggs and ham by trying the dish (77, 81). For Norton, sexual reproduction, as distinguished from cloning, is evidently no more inherent to human nature than a preference for one dish over another. Nor is marriage between a man and woman any more grounded in nature than same-sex “marriage”; to think otherwise, Norton suggests, is just a “mid-twentieth-century” prejudice (77). But Norton never supplies us with the grounds on which she herself distinguishes reasoned moral judgment from prejudice: one could just as easily infer from Dr. Seuss’s tale a defense of the naturalness of cannibalism. (Don’t knock it if you haven’t tried it.)

To return to Strauss himself, he was far from the unequivocal opponent of modernity that Norton claims. In citing his *Thoughts on Machiavelli* to indicate that he regarded Machiavelli as a “teacher of evil” (131), she provides no evidence of having read beyond the first page of that difficult book. Had Norton given more consideration to the range of Strauss’s thought, including his numerous writings devoted to modern political philosophy, she might also have been less “astonished” at his students’ appreciation of *The Federalist* (30). (As for Norton’s claim that Straussians like Bloom were cultural snobs who “could not see justice in democracy” [54], Bloom, as I recall him, loved poking holes in the cultural pretensions of the literati, once pointing out to a group of students, for instance, how the classic Hollywood thriller “Charade” far surpassed Roman Polanski’s tedious “Knife in the Water,” released around the same time and beloved of Cornell’s *soi-disant* deep thinkers. Although he certainly cultivated a taste for fine food and dress, he

never to my knowledge lost an appreciation of the freedom and opportunity in America that enabled people like him and many of his students to rise from humble beginnings to participate in the enterprise of liberal education that had formerly been, and in much of the rest of the world remained, the purview only of a wealthy elite.) Strauss himself, Norton acknowledges, was reportedly “delighted by the (relative) equality of the American academy” in comparison with its German counterpart (26).

Nor is Norton aware of the fundamental distinction between admiring classical philosophy and idealizing classical political life. What is one to make of her claim that “many” Straussians admire “the Ancients” for being “brave and blond [sic] and wise, living in a city of public assemblies and white marble temples,” these Straussians being unaware that the Athenians painted their temples—and supposedly missing Aristophanes’ dirty jokes, since they “picture the Greeks as—restrained, virtuous, and lawful” (115–16)? (She offers not a single citation to justify these outlandish assertions. Then again, since Norton also thinks we need to be told that “sex—and the preservation of the species—can take place outside marriage” [83], perhaps she really did believe that Straussians were ignorant of those facts.)

Norton’s contention that the strong executive and pre-emptive defense policy favored by some leading Strauss-trained policymakers constitutes a betrayal of the traditional “conservatism” exemplified in her view by Burke and Hamilton, among others (193, 195) also exhibits a curious misreading of those statesmen-thinkers. How would she account for Burke’s early advocacy of British military intervention in France to curb the excesses of the Revolutionary regime before the bacillus of terror spread beyond its shores? Has she recently reread *Federalist* nos. 70–73, in which Hamilton makes the case for “energy in the executive” as a leading prerequisite of good government? Is she unaware of Hamilton’s program for active government stimulation of commercial and industrial development? What strand of “conservative” thinking, in America or elsewhere, ever held that a country is obliged to constrain its efforts to defend itself against attack by decisions of an unrepresentative international body like the U.N. Security Council? Is Norton unaware of the roots of the doctrine of pre-emption in the Lockean teaching (in his Second Treatise) that people have a right and duty to act to overthrow a would-be tyrant before he has effected his designs? What group of professed conservatives, other than the libertarian Right of quite recent vintage, has ever maintained that the best government is the one that governs least? (Contrast, e.g., *Federalist* no. 1).

(Memo to Norton: it is Democrats, not Republicans, who celebrate the agrarian-populist Andrew Jackson at their Jefferson-Jackson Day dinners. Republicans prefer Lincoln, who—as Allen Guelzo’s recent intellectual biography *Redeemer President* [Eerdmans, 1999] stresses—favored an active governmental program of infrastructure building so as to foster economic development—and, not incidentally, weaken the political power of the agrarian slavocracy. Norton herself identifies Lincoln as a Straussian “saint,” but questions whether he merits praise even as the “Great Emancipator” since he suspended the writ of habeas corpus in limited areas during the Civil War [130, 133–34]. She passes over the fact that the Constitution itself authorizes such suspension when “the public safety may require it” “in cases of rebellion or invasion,” the only constitutional issue regarding Lincoln’s conduct in this regard being whether the President may authorize the suspension on his own initiative when Congress is not in session.)

Since Norton accuses Carnes Lord (falsely) of contending “that American statesmen should take authoritarian leaders as their models, and that the American people should develop a taste for a more authoritarian regime” (208), we might digress briefly at this point to explore her own standards of political judgment as expressed in her first book, *Alternative Americas: A Reading of Antebellum Political Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 1986). There she applauds the Confederacy rather than the Union during the Civil War as representing (according to an early essay by David Donald) “the democratic forces in American life,” and for retaining the “inviolability” of “the enumerated liberties of the Bill of Rights” (242–43). By contrast, she cites Lincoln’s suspension of habeas corpus to illustrate his “indifference to legal niceties in matters of state” (298), disregarding his earnest efforts to demonstrate his adherence to the Constitution as a whole (see, e.g., his 1861 “Message to Congress in Special Session”). For Norton, the Civil War was simply a conflict of “paradigms” in which the North was no less guilty of “racism” than the South; citing Jefferson Davis’s history of the Confederacy, she observes the absence of “mentions of the preservation of slavery as an object of the Rebellion...from the writings and pronouncements of the Southern leadership” to show that slavery, “while it might have been the occasion, was not the cause of the war” (221).

Consideration of John Calhoun’s posthumously published writings, which did so much to harden Southern resistance, and Alexander Stephens’s influential “Cornerstone” Address delivered just before the war broke out, might cast a different perspective on Norton’s claim that slavery was

not the real cause of the Civil War. One can easily understand why Southern leaders, in an effort to win both American and foreign support for their cause, wanted to downplay the slavery issue during the Civil War itself—and, for other rhetorical purposes, to minimize it later on. Yet they were careful to insert into the Confederate Constitution a prohibition on their Congress’s “denying or impairing the right of property in negro slaves.”

But Norton also downplays the moral evil of slavery itself. She observes that that Southern archconservative John Randolph of Roanoke regarded his slaves “as members of his household,” reflecting “the efforts of [Southern] society at large to integrate the slaves into the community” (194). And “the evident exploitation of workers in Northern industrial towns,” she notes sympathetically, “enabled slaveowners to argue that their provision for the slave was superior to the industrialist’s provision for the worker” (194). For Norton, the lasting significance of the Civil War lay not in the abolition of slavery but in “the firm establishment of industrial capitalism and the legitimation of an institutional military and of military conquest,” which “served thereafter as powerful constraints on American politics” (16). Norton’s enterprise of “cultural studies” works wonders, whether in assessing the cause of Southern slaveowners in the past or that of militant Islamists today.

But (to return to the book under review) while I have never known a Straussian who did not admire Lincoln, there is no necessary connection, contrary to Norton, between being a Straussian and being a conservative Republican. As the examples of William Galston, and of Michael Zuckert’s position on Iraq, indicate, it is perfectly possible to differ with the Bush administration’s policies and remain a Straussian in good standing. A prominent Straussian of an earlier generation, George Anastaplo, carried all the way to the Supreme Court his (self-argued) challenge to the Illinois Bar Association’s refusal to accredit him on account of his unwillingness to answer questions about his possible membership in the Communist Party, on the ground that such inquiries violated his constitutional rights to freedom of speech and association. Anastaplo has long enjoyed telling of how his political activities on behalf of freedom got him expelled both from the Soviet Union and from Greece under the colonels’ dictatorship. (A Straussian Marxist, however, is an oxymoron, precisely because both classical philosophy and the mainstream of its modern counterpart teach us to appreciate the limits of political life, grounded in human nature.)

Determining the policies that in particular circumstances will best advance the cause of justice and human well-being is a matter of

prudence, i.e., one that depends on circumstantial judgment (as Aristotle and Aquinas, among others, teach) as well as a knowledge of principles. Strauss himself was a great admirer of statesmen like Churchill and Lincoln, recognizing that philosophy could never supplant statesmanly judgment. (While future statesmen may learn from philosophy, political philosophy in turn stands to learn from the practice of statesmanship.) Following their teacher's example, Strauss's students continue to debate matters of public policy among themselves, no less than they do the interpretation of Plato, Rousseau, or Nietzsche.

But Norton thoroughly misreads the tradition of classical political philosophy by interpreting it as a mandate for a consistently cautious foreign and military policy. Not only does Aristotle legitimize wars undertaken to bring civilization to barbarians as well as for defense (*Politics* 1333b37ff.); Thucydides attributes the failure of the Sicilian Expedition not to its immoderation but to the Athenians' failure to stand by their brilliant commander Alcibiades—though Alcibiades himself was partly at fault for the un-Socratic *personal* immoderation that offended his fellow citizens' piety (*Peloponnesian War* II.65.11–12, VI.60). Nor, of course, would Thucydides have dissented from Kristol and Kagan's emphasis on the need to cultivate patriotism and the ability "to distinguish friends from enemies" in the international sphere, as Norton maintains (164). (She thinks that this emphasis links them with the proto-Nazi theorist Carl Schmitt [164], as if he had invented the friend-enemy distinction rather than making it the *central* fact of all politics, domestic as well as foreign, as Kristol and Kagan do not.)

The classical political philosophers were not blind to the varying necessities of international politics, in contrast to today's utopian so-called "realists." Norton's own perspective on international affairs resembles not Thucydides' outlook, but that of his feckless and unworldly Melians. The foolish trust that the latter put in the gods and the Spartans for their own defense resembles the faith that today's liberal partisans place in the United Nations.

Norton also displays a striking ignorance of the content of traditional just-war theory, believing that it justified a resort to war only if a nation had been attacked, "or if the threat of an attack was clear and imminent in the present" (143). Al Farabi, for instance, to whom she attributes this doctrine, justifies offensive as well as defensive wars conducted by the ruler of a just regime, and treats the principle of peaceful coexistence, based on the supposition that the natural human condition is one of universal peace, as

an error (*Plato's "Laws,"* 126.1–13; *The Virtuous City*, 75.7ff.; see Muhsin Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* [University of Chicago Press, 2001], 140–41). (For a broader corrective to Norton's account of just-war theory, see the nuanced account of major writers on the subject in Thomas Pangle and Peter Ahrensdorf, *Justice Among Nations* [University Press of Kansas, 2001].) Needless to say, Norton omits to mention the core just-war prohibition against the direct, purposeful *targeting* of civilians, perhaps not wanting to condemn the tactics of those that most of us label "terrorists."

IV.

There is a remarkable double standard at work in Norton's judgment of America's response to Islamist terror, though she claims it is Americans who have a double standard in this regard. On the one hand, Norton laments that the American media have failed to "count" "alien casualties" in the war in Iraq. (She does not specify whether she means the number of insurgents killed by American troops, or the far larger number killed by Arab terrorists.) She implies that America now seeks to exercise a "tyranny" over the world, witness its use of force in "Grenada, Panama, Bosnia, and Somalia." (She does not pause to consider the reasons for these interventions: deposing a Communist tyranny in the first and a corrupt drug-dealing tyrant in the second; defending Bosnian Muslims against Serbian terror in the third, and seeking to overthrow the rule of warlords over a starving people in the last.) She also complains that American media gave scant attention to America's sporadic bombing of Saddam Hussein's military facilities during the 1990's. (Saddam himself, along with his massive atrocities against his own people, goes unmentioned: for Norton we were bombing "Iraq.") On the other hand, Norton complains that Americans have an insufficient "capacity for enduring violence" ourselves, so that we deploy it "at the mere prospect of an imminent threat." Her own students, for instance, "are afraid" of terrorist violence in the wake of 9/11, even though "they knew no one lost in the disaster" (how does she know?). The students she teaches "have no thoughts of going to war" themselves (would students inclined in that direction be likely to confide in Norton, or even take one of her courses?). "Sacrifice and heroism are reserved to the reservists," not to those who attend "Ivy League" colleges (156–58). (Could this have something to do with the exclusion of ROTC, as well as military recruiters, from Ivy League campuses?) Thus Norton invites us to feel the pain of Islamic terrorists, and that of innocent Muslims who she claims have endured unspeakable acts of discrimination in this country (literally unspeakable, it seems, since she never identifies

the mistreatment the Straussians allegedly inflicted on her friends), while learning to bear the effects of terror more stoically ourselves, instead of striking out against those we regard as our enemies. (What pains has Norton suffered?)

Admittedly, it is hard for anyone who has observed American soldiers being interviewed in Iraq and Afghanistan to deny their evident moral seriousness and maturity in comparison with their academic counterparts of the sort likely to be found in Norton's classes. Why, then, does she mock her onetime mentor Leon Kass's observation that the American response to 9/11 has exhibited "a palpable increase in moral seriousness" (153)?

Norton responds to Kass's remark as if he were exhorting us to fight more wars purely for the sake of character-building, and observes that war compels its participants to perform "dishonorable actions," as if terrorists and those who struggle to defend us against their assaults are morally in the same boat. She observes that "in war, men kill" not only "other soldiers," but noncombatant "men, women, children, the aged, and the infirm" (154), without pausing to note that it is Islamofascist terrorists, in contrast to the armies of civilized nations, that have made the targeting of civilians their distinctive *modus operandi*. She does not consider that what Kass meant is that the increase in America's moral seriousness is a sign of our being reawakened to the fundamental necessities of political life, necessities which the Clinton administration, with its focus on issues like universal health care (to say nothing of the President's personal "problems"), thought it could safely disregard by avoiding any serious response to Al Qaeda's repeated attacks during the 1990's. (See Richard Miniter, *Losing Bin Laden: How Bill Clinton's Failures Unleashed Global Terror* [Regnery, 2003].) The day of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, shortly after Clinton's inauguration, his attorney general Janet Reno was preoccupied with achieving the bloody "liberation" of the Branch Davidian compound, as if weird but tiny and largely nonaggressive cults were the chief threat to our liberties. But no official of the Clinton administration ever displayed the moral frivolity, not to say downright slander, that Norton exhibits in implicitly equating the actions of the American military with the tactics of terrorists.

Perhaps the key to Norton's eagerness to distinguish Strauss from the "Straussians" lies in her last two chapters, respectively titled "Athens and Jerusalem" and "The School of Baghdad." In the former chapter, Norton claims that Strauss's students, not Strauss, are responsible for "the idealization of the state of Israel," as a result making "bigotry [against Arabs] the unacknowledged cornerstone of American foreign policy" (216). It would

waste the reader's time to quibble over Middle Eastern policy with an author so lost in Neverland that she thinks that American and Israeli "bigotry" (rather than Arafat, Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, etc.) has been the chief obstacle to "democratic self-rule and national self-determination for the Palestinians"—and that America's "persecution of Arabs and Muslims" is the cause of the "dangers" now upon us (213, 215). But in response to her attempt to drive a wedge between Strauss and the Straussians on this issue, I should note that the only letter I believe Strauss ever wrote to an American periodical was one he sent to *National Review* in the 1950's, protesting that magazine's (then) unsympathetic posture towards the state of Israel (reprinted in Kenneth Hart Green, ed., *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity* [State University of New York Press, 1997], 413–14).

Strauss's youthful commitment to political Zionism, a cause he never renounced, goes unmentioned by Norton. (On the sense in which Strauss deemed political Zionism "problematic," which is not at all Norton's sense, see the discussion by Green, *ibid.*, 28–36.) As for Norton's wish to follow Hermann Cohen in reducing Judaism to a religion of "universalism" (217), denying the essential character both of the distinctive Jewish law and of its connectedness to the independence of Israel as a Jewish state, here she is simply following the fashion of contemporary European intellectuals who wish to absolve their own countries of complicity in the Holocaust as well as many centuries of anti-Jewish persecution by representing Israel itself as the latter-day root of injustice and "exclusion." (See Alain Finkelkraut, "The Religion of Humanity and the Sin of the Jews," *Azure* 21 [Summer, 5675/2005], 23–32.) Strauss foresaw this sort of danger as Cohen, for all his virtues, did not.

Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire is a book that exemplifies the faults and vices of intolerance, paranoia, and the willful misreading of texts that it wrongly attributes to the Straussians. In contrast to Shadia Drury's equally vitriolic attacks on Strauss and his students, it exhibits no evidence of serious study of the Straussians' writings, relying instead on a form of character assassination probably surpassing anything undertaken by Senator Joseph McCarthy, or by the pop biographer Kitty Kelley. Additionally, Norton denounces as if they were members of the Straussian conspiracy a considerable variety of non-Straussian scholars (e.g., Eugene Genovese, Daniel Pipes, Frum, Perle) who have no connection to Strauss to my knowledge, but are simply people whose views she disagrees with. Gradually one realizes, however, that these aren't merely the targets of guilt-by-association. Rather, what they or most of them have in common (along with George W. Bush,

Tom DeLay, and the Christian Coalition, 206–7, 228), and what irks Norton about them, is that they are defenders of Israel, support for which, Norton maintains, is responsible for making anti-Muslim bigotry the foundation of American policy (216; here Norton herself indeed sounds like a certain pompous, bigoted self-styled guru of 1950’s American “conservatism”). Not even Shadia Drury would stoop to calling Strauss’s students, many of whom were Jewish, “brownshirts.”

In sum, this is a book guided entirely by extreme partisan passion and (it would appear) personal resentments, without any element of reasoned discourse, let alone scholarship. While Norton expresses “regret” for “any trouble that comes to anyone for their involvement with me” (xiv)—a strange *apologia*—the only trouble that her friends are likely to incur as a result of the book is embarrassment.

It is remarkable, but revelatory, that one of America’s most distinguished university presses should have published a book like this. It is unthinkable that a comparable book lambasting a liberal icon like, say, John Rawls on the basis of rumor, innuendo, and misquotation (let alone one commenting on the alleged sexual deficiencies of his pupils) would ever see the light of day. What academic press would publish a book spreading gossip about, say, Barney Frank’s sexual proclivities, as Norton does to Allan Bloom (whose homosexuality was an open secret among many of his students, but who did not make it a public issue as Norton apparently thinks he should have, and was certainly not flamboyant about it as she maintains)? What can Yale’s editors have been thinking?

POSTSCRIPT

In order to get a better sense of Anne Norton’s own view of what constitutes sound scholarship—to know, as they say, “where she’s coming from”—I perused the other volume she published with Yale in 2004, *95 Theses on Politics, Culture, and Method*. The book, as suggested by its title, consists of 95 aphorisms on social-science inquiry, each given a brief (typically one- to two-page) elaboration. “Like their namesakes,” she explains, “they were directed against an orthodoxy” and a “hierarchy,” that of existing (presumably quantitative and “behavioral”) political science. Here are a few samples from the list:

15. “The natural is a cultural category.”

22. “All cultures are exceptional. No culture is exceptional.” (This thesis is

intended as a response to the “unreasonable” but “lingering belief in ‘American exceptionalism.’”)

27. “Every identity is in reference to a collective.”

52. “Facts are made.”

79. “Systems of knowledge are systems of power.”

Perhaps these titles make more intelligible the reply by a sympathetic former University of Chicago political science professor (and possible contributing source of Norton’s claims about the Straussian “plot” to take over Chicago’s department during the 1960’s), Lloyd Rudolph, to a review of Norton’s Strauss book by Alan Wolfe in the *New York Times Book Review*. Wolfe (not known for Straussian sympathies) had dismissed the book as “a short, gossipy, polemical and unpersuasive sketch devoted mainly to telling second-hand stories” and lacking any documentation. Wolfe thereby betrayed, according to Rudolph, “a yearning for objective truth that misses Norton’s point” in writing the book. Norton’s “knowledge is subjective, what she knows; not objective, what the archive allegedly knows,” Rudolph explained, and thereby calls for no documentation. (Note the implied contrast between real but “subjective” knowledge and the merely “alleged” truth contained in archives. One might call this the Dan Rather approach to scholarship.) Rudolph described Norton’s book as reaffirming her status as “a great semiotacist and ethnographer,” and ended with the fitting wish (see thesis no. 79 above), “More power to her.”

The notion of semiotics (the study of “signs”) as a means to “power” may seem farfetched. But in fact, as Norton’s Strauss book indicates, there is a potentially powerful, three-step rhetorical trope at work here. First, deny that there is any such thing as objective truth. Second, launch an impassioned denunciation of your political opponents, making farfetched charges that you represent as if you certainly thought them true (just as Al Qaeda members are taught that if captured and tried in American courts, they should immediately claim to have been tortured). Third, when critics challenge your claims, revert to step one, explaining that you were only setting forth “your” truth, and that it would be unreasonable, perhaps boorish, to complain that you didn’t document them.

Politics has always been the sphere of rhetoric, and philosophers from Socrates onwards, as Strauss demonstrated, evinced their recognition of the need to practice rhetoric as a means of defending their

enterprise against corruption through vulgarization, as well as to defend politics itself against sophistical attacks on its moral foundations. What distinguishes Norton's enterprise and that of her "postmodern" sympathizers is the attempt to erase the very distinction between philosophy and rhetoric.

Aside from its deleterious effects on liberal education, postmodernism now threatens the integrity of democratic political discourse itself. According to news accounts, leading members of the Democratic Party have come to believe that their recent electoral defeats stem not from any substantive weaknesses in the positions they have taken (which might generate a rethinking of those positions), but from their failure to "frame" the terms of discourse properly. Since reasonable people could not *knowingly* favor the policies of the Bush administration, such as the war in Iraq and the Patriot Act, it follows that a majority of voters have supported them only because Democrats have made insufficient use of devices like "metaphor and narrative" to get their points across. Hence the new darling of party leaders is a hitherto obscure Berkeley linguistics professor, George Lakoff, who attributes the Republican victory of 2004 to its ability to foist labels like "flip-flopper" on John Kerry (who famously explained that he voted for the Iraq war before he voted against it), or to depict the tax cuts they favor as "tax relief" (implying that taxes are a painful burden rather than the price we should gladly pay for all the goodies that government bestows on us). Democrats, according to Lakoff, have wrongly assumed "that people are rational actors who make their decisions based on facts," rather than being "programmed to respond to the frames have been embedded deep in our conscious minds" by calculating politicians. To regain power, Democrats need only "frame" issues in a more effective way, without having to change their policy positions (See Matt Bai, "The Framing Wars," *New York Times Magazine*, July 17, 2005, 38ff.) This is an outlook far more patronizing to ordinary Americans, and far less democratic, than the moderate republicanism espoused by the American Founders, as seen in *The Federalist*, and applauded by most Straussians.

Leo Strauss rarely wrote anything about contemporary political issues. He represented the pursuit of truth, as Socrates did, as itself the highest human good, rather than an enterprise to be valued chiefly for its practical byproducts. But he also demonstrated how philosophy, properly understood, generates a sense of political responsibility. The philosopher suffers neither from an exaggerated, utopian faith in the power of unaided reason to triumph in political debate, nor from a disgust with his fellow citizens

for their incapacity to rise to his level.

Those Straussians, Republicans and Democrats alike, who chose to pursue public careers have demonstrated how the serious study of writers like Thucydides and Plato, Machiavelli and Hobbes, Lincoln and the authors of *The Federalist* can provide an appreciation of the possibilities and limits of political life that “semiotics” (a variant of historicism) cannot offer. In a manner akin to Thomas Jefferson’s hope that liberal education might nourish a “natural aristocracy” within modern democracy whose rise would serve to benefit their countrymen, Strauss and his students sought to restore the serious study of classic texts to the core of the American college curriculum, in a manner that would respond to students’ deepest longings as well as promote a thoughtful civic culture. (See Strauss’s essays on liberal education in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* [New York: Basic Books, 1968], and Bloom’s in *Giants and Dwarfs*, as well as his *Closing*.) But as Socrates had his Critias (and his Meletus and Callicles), Strauss and his students will inevitably have their Nortons. (Meletus, for one, would heartily agree with Norton that one’s “identity” exists solely “in reference to a collective”; similarly, he shares her hostility to the philosophic endeavor to distinguish nature from convention, since it weakens attachment to the collective, i.e., in his case, the city.) Then again, even Callicles had a sense of shame (Plato, *Gorgias* 494e).

