Leo Strauss' Philosophy of Deception

What would you do if you wanted to topple Saddam Hussein, but your intelligence agencies couldn't find the evidence to justify a war?

A follower of Leo Strauss may just hire the "right" kind of men to get the job done – people with the intellect, acuity, and, if necessary, the political commitment, polemical skills, and, above all, the imagination to find the evidence that career intelligence officers could not detect.

The "right" man for Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, suggests Seymour Hersh in his recent New Yorker article entitled 'Selective Intelligence,' was Abram Shulsky, director of the Office of Special Plans (OSP) – an agency created specifically to find the evidence of WMDs and/or links with Al Qaeda, piece it together, and clinch the case for the invasion of Iraq.

Like Wolfowitz, Shulsky is a student of an obscure German Jewish political philosopher named Leo Strauss who arrived in the United States in 1938. Strauss taught at several major universities, including Wolfowitz and Shulsky's alma mater, the University of Chicago, before his death in 1973.

Strauss is a popular figure among the neoconservatives. Adherents of his ideas include prominent figures both within and outside the administration. They include 'Weekly Standard' editor William Kristol; his father and indeed the godfather of the neoconservative movement, Irving Kristol; the new Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence, Stephen Cambone, a number of senior fellows at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) (home to former Defense Policy Board chairman Richard Perle and Lynne Cheney), and Gary Schmitt, the director of the influential Project for the New American Century (PNAC), which is chaired by Kristol the Younger.

Strauss' philosophy is hardly incidental to the strategy and mindset adopted by these men – as is obvious in Shulsky's 1999 essay titled "Leo Strauss and the World of Intelligence (By Which We Do Not Mean Nous)" (in Greek philosophy the term *nous* denotes the highest form of rationality). As Hersh notes in his article, Shulsky and his co-author Schmitt "criticize America's intelligence community for its failure to appreciate the duplicitous nature of the regimes it deals with, its susceptibility to social-science notions of proof, and its inability to cope with deliberate concealment." They argued that Strauss's idea of hidden meaning, "alerts one to the possibility that political life may be closely linked to deception. Indeed, it suggests that deception is the norm in political life, and the hope, to say nothing of the expectation, of establishing a politics that can dispense with it is the exception."

Rule One: Deception

It's hardly surprising then why Strauss is so popular in an administration obsessed with secrecy, especially when it comes to matters of foreign policy. Not only did Strauss have few qualms about using deception in politics, he saw it as a necessity. While professing deep respect for American democracy, Strauss believed that societies should be hierarchical – divided between an elite who should lead, and the masses who should follow. But unlike fellow elitists like Plato, he was less

concerned with the moral character of these leaders. According to Shadia Drury, who teaches politics at the University of Calgary, Strauss believed that "those who are fit to rule are those who realize there is no morality and that there is only one natural right – the right of the superior to rule over the inferior."

This dichotomy requires "perpetual deception" between the rulers and the ruled, according to Drury. Robert Locke, another Strauss analyst says,"The people are told what they need to know and no more." While the elite few are capable of absorbing the absence of any moral truth, Strauss thought, the masses could not cope. If exposed to the absence of absolute truth, they would quickly fall into nihilism or anarchy, according to Drury, author of 'Leo Strauss and the American Right' (St. Martin's 1999).

Second Principle: Power of Religion

According to Drury, Strauss had a "huge contempt" for secular democracy. Nazism, he believed, was a nihilistic reaction to the irreligious and liberal nature of the Weimar Republic. Among other neoconservatives, Irving Kristol has long argued for a much greater role for religion in the public sphere, even suggesting that the Founding Fathers of the American Republic made a major mistake by insisting on the separation of church and state. And why? Because Strauss viewed religion as absolutely essential in order to impose moral law on the masses who otherwise would be out of control.

At the same time, he stressed that religion was for the masses alone; the rulers need not be bound by it. Indeed, it would be absurd if they were, since the truths proclaimed by religion were "a pious fraud." As Ronald Bailey, science correspondent for Reason magazine points out, "Neoconservatives are pro-religion even though they themselves may not be believers."

"Secular society in their view is the worst possible thing,'' Drury says, because it leads to individualism, liberalism, and relativism, precisely those traits that may promote dissent that in turn could dangerously weaken society's ability to cope with external threats. Bailey argues that it is this firm belief in the political utility of religion as an "opiate of the masses" that helps explain why secular Jews like Kristol in 'Commentary' magazine and other neoconservative journals have allied themselves with the Christian Right and even taken on Darwin's theory of evolution.

Third Principle: Aggressive Nationalism

Like Thomas Hobbes, Strauss believed that the inherently aggressive nature of human beings could only be restrained by a powerful nationalistic state. "Because mankind is intrinsically wicked, he has to be governed," he once wrote. "Such governance can only be established, however, when men are united – and they can only be united against other people."

Not surprisingly, Strauss' attitude toward foreign policy was distinctly Machiavellian. "Strauss thinks that a political order can be stable only if it is united by an external threat," Drury wrote in her book. "Following Machiavelli, he maintained that if no external threat exists then *one has to be manufactured* (emphases added)."

"Perpetual war, not perpetual peace, is what Straussians believe in," says Drury. The idea easily translates into, in her words, an "aggressive, belligerent foreign policy," of the kind that has been advocated by neocon groups like PNAC and AEI scholars – not to mention Wolfowitz and other administration hawks who have called for a world order dominated by U.S. military power. Strauss' neoconservative students see foreign policy as a means to fulfill a "national destiny" – as Irving Kristol defined it already in 1983 – that goes far beyond the narrow confines of a " myopic

national security."

As to what a Straussian world order might look like, the analogy was best captured by the philosopher himself in one of his – and student Allen Bloom's – many allusions to Gulliver's Travels. In Drury's words, "When Lilliput was on fire, Gulliver urinated over the city, including the palace. In so doing, he saved all of Lilliput from catastrophe, but the Lilliputians were outraged and appalled by such a show of disrespect."

The image encapsulates the neoconservative vision of the United States' relationship with the rest of the world – as well as the relationship between their relationship as a ruling elite with the masses. "They really have no use for liberalism and democracy, but they're conquering the world in the name of liberalism and democracy," Drury says.

Jim Lobe writes on foreign policy for Alternet. His work has also appeared on Foreign Policy In Focus and TomPaine.com.