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## Reply to Smith

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In his response to my review, Steven Smith has made several seismic shifts in his position. In the book, Smith denounced the neoconservatives for totally misunderstanding and misrepresenting Strauss. He told us that the point of his book was to defend Strauss from the “hostile takeover” (p. 3) of the neoconservatives by showing that Strauss was not a conservative of any kind (neo or otherwise), but a “friend of liberal democracy—one of the best friends democracy has ever had” (p. ix).

But now he tells us that neoconservatism is one path out of Strauss, but not the only path. And Smith compares the relation between Strauss and the neoconservatives with the relation between Lenin and Marx or the relation between Hitler and Nietzsche. This is a dramatic departure from the book.

In my view, even though there is a clear path from Leo Strauss to the neoconservatives, it does not follow that all Straussians are neoconservatives, just as not all Marxists are Leninists, and not all Nietzscheans are Nazis. So far, I am in agreement with Smith’s new position. Indeed, I regard the connection between Leo Strauss and the neoconservatives to be complex, and that is why I devoted a whole book to exploring it—*Leo Strauss and the American Right*.<sup>1</sup> I showed how Strauss’s ideas led to a variety of conservative positions—but none of these positions could be construed as liberal. And this is where Smith and I disagree. He now thinks that neoconservatism is one path out of Strauss, and liberalism is another. In contrast, I believe that there are several logical political positions that follow from Strauss’s point of view, but none of them can be meaningfully construed as liberal.

What leads Smith to assume that Strauss was sympathetic to liberalism is Strauss’s discussion of the Jewish question in “Why We Remain Jews.”<sup>2</sup> In that essay, Strauss contrasts the persecution of Jews that is sponsored by the state with their persecution in liberal society at the hands of private individuals. Smith concludes that even though liberalism is not a panacea, it is better than the alternatives. But this is not Strauss’s conclusion, which I have dealt with at length in *Leo Strauss and the American Right*. Suffice it to say here that for Strauss, the situation of Jews is not improved in liberal society. And Strauss is surely right in cases where the society is bigoted and vicious.

Strauss was certainly not an indiscriminate lover or advocate of tyranny. So, it is only reasonable to find him denouncing garden variety tyranny in the name of freedom. However, Strauss was an advocate of the *covert* tyranny of the wise, which he referred to as “the tyrannical teaching,” and insisted that it be communicated with the utmost care and secrecy.

When it comes to secrecy, Smith has *totally* repudiated his position in the book. In the book, Smith characterized Strauss as an esoteric writer (p. 7), who communicated by winks (p. 8), and was so deliberately coy that he refused to walk through an open door, when he could enter through a keyhole (p. 185). Smith wrote,

*Natural Right and History* presents itself in the first instance as a patriotic effort to recover the American tradition of natural right from its corruption by German historicism and relativism. But appearances can be misleading. The same rules that Strauss applies to the reading of other books should be applied to his own. One rule of thumb Strauss attributes to careful writers is that . . . one should always appear pious and patriotic at the beginning and end of one’s discourse and put one’s true beliefs in the middle. . . . The strategy Strauss attributes to the most careful writers seems to be a reflection on his own manner of composition. (p. 168)

But now Smith tells us that esotericism is a “historical thesis” intended to help us understand “texts produced under conditions of persecution.” And he denies that Strauss had “an esotericism of [his] own.”

Finally, I am grateful to Smith for clarifying what he meant by calling Strauss a “friend” of liberal democracy. Since I am not a flatterer of Strauss, I must be a “friend” of Leo Strauss—in fact, the best friend he ever had. Now, I finally understand myself.

## Notes

1. Shadia Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right*, updated ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997).

2. Leo Strauss, “Why We Remain Jews: Can Jewish Faith and History Still Speak to Us?” in *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker*, ed. Kenneth Deutsch and Walter Nicgorski (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 61.