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Speaking Truth to Power:

Has Political Science Become Irrelevant to Policy?

By Max J. Skidmore

Abstract

Political scientists currently devote considerable effort to forecasting, but when it comes to policy, they rarely deal with content as opposed to efficacy, efficiency, or cost effectiveness. Similarly, they hardly ever consider “speaking truth to power” to be their obligation. This article suggests that policy and ethics would benefit if political scientists, like economists, would utilize their skills to do so. Caution, though, is necessary.

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Speaking Truth to Power: Has Political Science Become Irrelevant to Policy?

Some years ago, it not only was possible, but would have seemed almost mandatory, to ask the following:

What Role for Political Science?¹

The role that political science tends to play in recent times must be troubling for those of its practitioners whose interests trend toward policy. The inside-the-Beltway mentality that permeates the news media frequently stresses method and process, rather than content. To a large extent, political science reflects similar tendencies.

Consider the example of Jacob Hacker, an exception among political scientists, who has been active in health policy, including advising policy makers on health care reform. After passage of the Affordable Care Act, he wrote an excellent article discussing among other things how reform happened, why the legislation took the form it did, how the intense polarization occurred, and what obstacles the bill faced.² Most interesting for purposes of this article, he asked whether it all had been worth it. The toll his activities took on his private life were excessive, but, although he conceded that “the healthcare bill was

¹ From Max J. Skidmore, “‘Bi-Partisanship’ as a Detriment to Anti-Poverty Efforts: Some Contrarian Comments,” *Poverty and Public Policy*, 5:4 (2013), 281-291.

² Jacob Hacker, “The Road to Somewhere: Why Health Reform Happened,” *Perspectives on Politics*, 8:3 (2010), 861-876.

incomplete and imperfect in many ways,” he judged it also to have been “a vital first step” and wrote that he had no “regrets about stepping into the realm of policy advocacy.”³ As for the law's restrictions, he conceded that he believed that it might have been possible to have had a stronger ACA, but considering the circumstances, not stronger by much.

Hacker in no way complained about his own situation, nor about his own treatment. On the contrary, he praised the institutions where he was based, had nothing to criticize with regard to his personal situation, and paid tribute to the many scholars and others who supported him “tirelessly.” Despite this, obvious though it surely is to others in the profession, he had to stress that, with regard to policy advocacy, “this sort of work is not highly valued within political science.” The reason for this, he said, “may seem self-evident—policy recommendations seem to be a breach of objectivity and a distraction from real scholarship.” Undoubtedly this is the case, but, as he points out cogently, “that does not explain why academic economists routinely engage with public issues while political scientists appear more reticent. Political scientists,” he stressed, “have the potential to say at least as much as economists do about how institutions and policies are structured—and might be better structured—as economists do.” Moreover, in a comment that he

³ *Ibid.*, 872.

phrased beautifully, he reminded our historically challenged discipline that “our profession once had far less reluctance about speaking the truth that it discovered to the power that it studied.”

Now, it should seem necessary to press the question much further. Why is it that even the discipline most directly related to the study of politics provided no hint that the most fundamental political institutions of the world’s oldest democracy, its oldest constitutional system, were vulnerable—perhaps even to an existential level? Why were practitioners of the only discipline devoted—presumably exclusively—to politics unaware that the system’s safeguards built so carefully through the centuries were so fragile as to be shaken to their foundations so suddenly?

Why could political “scientists” not have foreseen, and warned, that a new president, could be selected over the opposition of clear voter preference, and then could simply ignore restrictions, and proceed to use the office openly for personal gain? How could they not know that a candidate could openly urge the participation of a foreign power in the election and still be placed into office? How could they not have been aware of the potential from the enormous warping of the electorate that simple tools of gerrymandering and voter suppression would generate? How could they not have warned that the willingness of a party to disregard all precedent and constitutional provisions could be rewarded by control of the Court? Were they so committed to their narrow view of “science,” and value-free study that they were compelled to ignore what some other observers—journalists, policy analysts, novelists, playwrights, poets, and the

like— might have recognized as obvious? Did their devotion to “objectivity” make it impossible for them to understand that warnings were in order? Or if they did become aware of the potential for danger, were they so repressed by fear that their objectivity might be questioned that they did not have the courage to speak out for fear that the discipline’s major figures might disapprove?

Political science, one must concede, is certainly not the only discipline to go astray. Southern “Vindicators” dominated American history throughout much of the 20th century. Seeking to clean up the south’s sordid record, Confederate apologists succeeded for far too long in making obvious nonsense seem convincing to the racist and the gullible. Slavery had little or nothing to do with the Civil War, they insisted, as they glorified Robert E. Lee and vilified Ulysses S. Grant. Similarly, scientists as well as most of the social sciences should do penance for their history of condemning same-sex orientation, praising eugenics, employing lobotomies, toying with insulin shock therapies, providing treatment by radiation for acne and other non-threatening conditions, encouraging radiographic studies of fetuses to provide better preparation for birth, and accepting lifetime incarceration for Hansen’s disease (or leprosy, a condition that turns out not to be highly communicable, and now is easily curable).

The flaws that may have afflicted other disciplines, though, in no way, excuse those of political science. As the elections of 2016 demonstrate so clearly, political science offered little or nothing of help to the public, professionals or otherwise. Not only did confusion and imprecision reign below the projected veneer of confidence, but few, if any insights, came from the work of political

scientists. Their work produced virtually no warnings, when there were clear dangers that should have been readily apparent.

Andrew Gelman of Columbia University—himself, a professor of both statistics and political science—wrote of lessons that political scientists should have learned from the 2016 debacle.⁴ First among these was that the party no longer decides, although experience with primary victories by, say, David Duke for the Republicans in Louisiana (1991), and followers of Lyndon LaRouche for the Democrats (1986), should have demonstrated that long before 2016. This hardly requires a scientific study to verify, any more than the other astute observations on Gelman’s list. These include such things as: the existence of survey nonresponse, the reality of polarization, the minimal effect (so far, at least) of demographics, the lack of correlation between elite and popular opinion, the clear existence of an authoritarian dimension to American politics, the difficulty of persuading relatively apathetic citizens to cast votes, the exaggerated role played by overconfident commentators, and the like.

It does not diminish Professor Gelman’s work in the least to point out that most, if not all, of these are easily ascertainable simply by acquiring general political knowledge. It is telling that he has made real contributions—contributions that did not emerge from formal scientific studies, and in fact exceeded any insights from such studies. No doubt Professor Gelman’s expertise in statistics

⁴ Andrew Gelman, “19 Lessons for Political Scientists from the 2016 Election,” *Slate* (8 December 2016); http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/2017/03/t

enables him to be more realistic—more perceptive—than most political scientists when considering statistical approaches. Perhaps it is not too much to suggest that the profession’s excessive preoccupation with method, as opposed to content, may have obscured the obvious, and prevented observation of the “big picture.” One suspects that this is especially true among the less sophisticated—and hence, likely more dogmatic—of political scientists.

Much post-election commentary (including comments from many Democrats), in fact, would suggest that there had been a landslide favoring the Republicans (“Democrats ignored working-class voters,” etc., even though a cursory glance at the Democratic platform and at Hillary Clinton’s speeches suggests that this is untrue). Actually, however, although the Republicans certainly remained extremely strong at the important state and local levels, the Democrats took a substantial majority of the popular vote. Moreover, they succeeded in gaining seats in both the House and the Senate. If this were a landslide, it was a very odd one. Whatever national “landslide” there was seemed exclusively to be an electoral college phenomenon (and the electoral vote itself—despite Mr. Trump’s perception of a crushing victory—was hardly overwhelming, exceeding only 11 others out of a total of 58). There was no national landslide among the population at large.

Immediately after the election another political scientist, Jason Blakely of Pepperdine University, had speculated that there was a fundamental

misconception at the root of modern political science.⁵ Whether the study of politics is truly a science is a question, he submitted, but one that goes largely unasked. He pointed out that he was not objecting to the use of polling and such techniques. These, he said, “can be an extremely useful tool for gaining snapshots of widespread beliefs and practices within society.” What he did object to, was using them to forecast, which he described as “the attempt to report predictions as supposedly scientific or quasi-scientific findings akin to work that happens in the natural sciences.” He, and humanists in general, argue for including the study of politics in the humanities, because, they say, political knowledge is far closer to history “than to physics or biology.” This is because, he says quoting the philosopher Charles Taylor, “human beings are ‘self-interpreting animals.’” Thus, as creative agents, their interpretations can always change, and do not reflect the regularity of the natural sciences. Nevertheless, regardless of what he calls its spectacular errors, “the attempt to turn the study of politics into a science continues to be one of the biggest and most well-funded intellectual projects of our time,” and those “who present themselves as ‘scientists’ are given much larger platforms than political historians, cultural experts, or legal theorists.”⁶

One of those legal theorists, Jacqueline Stevens of Northwestern University (who also is a Professor of Political Science there), in a devastating

⁵ Jason Blakely, “Is Political Science This Year’s Election Casualty?,” *The Atlantic* (14 November 2016).

⁶ *Ibid.*

New York Times op ed, had previously—more than two years before the 2016 elections—pointed out the failure through the years of political scientists as forecasters.⁷ She wrote that it was an “open secret” among political scientists that her disciplinary colleagues had “failed spectacularly” at making “accurate political predictions,” and that these were “the field’s benchmark for what counts as science.” The effect of all this, she maintained reasonably, was the waste of “colossal amounts of time and money.” She pointed to political scientists’ “insistence, during the cold war, that the Soviet Union would persist as a nuclear threat to the United States.” The historian, John Lewis Gaddis, she noted, had written that this was an issue of such huge importance that “no approach to the study of international relations claiming both foresight and competence should have failed to see it coming,” yet all did so. Regarding domestic politics, she said, the record was no better. In 1992, just before the Democratic victory of Clinton’s election that year, and the Republican congressional victories of 1994, Morris Fiorina had reflected the conventional wisdom of the time when he wrote that we appeared to be facing a long period of Republican presidents and Democratic Congresses. She noted that a political psychologist, Philip E. Tetlock, more than a decade before had questioned in depth some 284 political scientists on basic issues. His book, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?*, won an APSA prize (the Robert Lane Award for 2006), but concluded that “chimps randomly throwing darts at the possible outcomes would have done

⁷ Jacqueline Stevens, “Political Scientists are Lousy Forecasters,” *New York Times Sunday Review* (24 June 2014), SR6.

almost as well as the experts,” most of whom had Ph.D.s in political science. She favored studies of probability and statistical significance, and urged continuation of governmental funding, but warned against continuing to assume that they provide knowledge that can lead to accurate forecasting.⁸

When confronting the pretensions of many American political scientists, it might be well to consider a comment from Peter Taylor-Goodby, Professor of Social Policy at the University of Kent, when addressing the Academy of Social Sciences on 5 July 2012.⁹ “Social science,” he said, “deals with areas where the world outside needs answers but by the nature of the case it cannot provide the sort of simple, definitive, directive answers that are wanted because the knowledge it produces isn’t like that.” It is time to stop pretending that it does.

In terms of practical effects, consider the elections of 2000. Political scientists had been caught unaware of the imprecision of vote counts in the United States. To add to that, their work did nothing to warn against, let alone to prevent, Republican leaders from skillfully replacing a valid concern for accurate counting with a spurious one that asserted widespread existence of the virtually nonexistent “voter fraud.” In 2016, nothing came from political science that could alert the political system to the vulnerability—even the fragility—of the most basic, the most fundamental, political institutions of the United States.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Peter Taylor-Goodby, “The State of Social Science: Only Itself to Blame?” *Academy of Social Sciences* (11 July 2012); <http://www.socialsciencespace.com/2012/07/the-state-of-social-science-only-itself-to-blame/>.

Jacob Hacker engaged in policy, specifically in health reform, because “of something that students of American politics too often forget or trivialize: Policy substance matters. It matters most obviously because what government does has an enormous effect on Americans. But it also matters because of the political ramifications of this obvious but oft-neglected fact. Fights over policy are fights over who gets to exercise government authority toward what ends.” When political scientists “treat policy as a black box or an ideological label,” they miss the “extent to which it is policy substance itself—‘who gets what, when, and how,’ in Harold Lasswell’s famous phrasing—that is the key concern of political contestants.”¹⁰

Hacker conceded that political scientists should not merely leave their desks and jump into the fray (unless, he said, the “calling is so loud it cannot be ignored”), but argued that they should be more “attuned to the contours of public policy and the process by which it is made.” This will make political scientists more relevant, but that is not the real reason to engage, which is to make for better political scientists. Hacker warns wisely not to expect professional rewards, but to be “guided a little more by the fascination with what government does that first sparked the profession.” In this way, the profession might see a broader, if not always prettier, “picture of how and for whom our democracy works.”¹¹

¹⁰ Hacker, quoted in Skidmore, “Bi-Partisanship,” 872.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

One may note that to do this, political scientists must remember the roots of their discipline—why politics is the field of study in the first place—and retreat from the effort to convert it into something narrow, completely mathematical, and largely unconnected to human beings. The arrogance of one of the former pillars of the discipline who said “if ya’ ain’t doing math, you ain’t doing political science,” echoes down through the decades to become admonitions from self-appointed gatekeepers of today who forbid (impotently, of course) anyone who comments on the nature of policy proposals from self-identifying as a political scientist.

From ancient times, there has been much thought devoted to justice and ethics. As far back as Aristotle, the study of politics was the “Architectonic Science,” and dealt with the good life. Centuries later, it came to involve speaking truth to power. Both of these require dealing with values, and in politics this means that the substance of policy—not merely its process—is relevant.

Today, however, concerning itself primarily with procedure or forecasting, American political science rarely deals with the actual substance of policy. “Speaking truth to power” apparently (so the reasoning goes) would require sacrificing the “Most Important Criterion”: scientific objectivity. Therefore, as political science strives to become more scientific, it simultaneously becomes more inclined to avoid critical analysis.

This certainly is not to oppose scientific techniques in general, or quantification in particular. Both are valuable, and often are necessary, in the study of politics. Rather, it is to call for recognition that such approaches are not

the only ones with relevance or worth. To limit studies to “scientific” approaches, narrowly defined, is simultaneously to deny researchers many insights, while simultaneously reducing—or in many instances even virtually eliminating—any ability to have influence. Forbidding all approaches other than those that bear the imprimatur of the academy’s current power holders is troublesome for many reasons.

Additionally, restricting approaches creates many opportunities for error when scientific techniques are used inappropriately, applied without appreciation of nuance, or concentrated upon the easily quantifiable—which is likely also to be trivial. What such an approach does achieve, however, is to relieve researchers from any obligation to move political knowledge in the direction of “the good life,” and also to protect researchers from the consequences of their own findings

In general, even in political philosophy, one now would have to search far and wide to find the concrete as opposed to the abstract. Similarly, because the phrase “ethics in politics” currently would seem almost to be an oxymoron in the real world (and almost completely lacking as a concern in the literature of political science), it would appear as though the discipline could play a key role. Nevertheless, both popular media and disciplinary journals tend to avoid comments that could subject them to criticism for indulging in value judgments—or perhaps even to fear critical analysis of any sort. This avoids the danger of being seen as partisan, or, in the case of scholarly journals, being judged to be “journalistic,” which academic political scientists might conclude is even worse.

That damning term, “journalistic,” now seems to be an all-purpose fallback to use as the basis for rejecting conclusions without going to the trouble of considering them on their merits—or their consequences. The term often appears in reviews of any study that lacks rigorous quantitative analysis, or that involves evaluation of policy content with reference to values. Sadly, it may be applied simply when the work under scrutiny is too clearly written, too accessible, too inexcusably lacking in jargon, and too active with avoidance of the passive voice.

To perform their vital functions both political analysis and political science must have relevance to the real world. A telling example took place in 2006 when the elections involved furious arguments over the use of embryonic stem cells in research. In Missouri, State Auditor Claire McCaskill challenged sitting Senator Jim Talent, who had taken a firm position against the use of such stem cells as “destroying human life.” Former senator John Danforth, a fellow Republican, had attempted to inject some realism into the argument when he commented that no one attempting to rescue a person from a burning building if forced to choose between saving stem cells or an actual human being would fail to choose the human being. Senator Talent responded to a reporter’s question that the rescuer would have to make a value judgment to determine which to choose.

State Auditor Clair McCaskill became U. S. Senator Claire McCaskill.

Note that Senator Danforth is an Episcopal clergyman, as well as a lawyer. Note, also, that political science as a discipline had nothing to contribute to the discussion.

This is not to say that the issue was spurious, or to deny that thoughtful people may arrive at many differing opinions on the subject. The point is that the very discipline that has politics as its subject did not concern itself with the controversy that was at the heart of so much discussion. Could political science have made a contribution? If so, should it have done so? Would it have been able to distinguish between matters that are completely abstract, and those that have real-world effects? The Scholastics have been the butt of jokes because of allegedly spending much time and effort debating the number of angels that might be able to dance on the head of a pin, but does modern political discourse bear some similarities? If so, could political science help to clarify matters? Does the tendency to avoid values make political science irrelevant? It would seem that in refusing to deal with the substance of policy, political science comes close to ignoring the heart of the field of study that justifies its own existence as a discipline.

It not only is appropriate, but even vital, to ask, then, whether under such circumstances political science can have a role to play in politics beyond political behavior. Can the discipline contribute to political ethics? Can it participate in the evaluation of policy content as opposed merely to that of process? More fundamentally, can it even find ways to contribute to policy? Is it possible to engage in criticism and to produce policy advances without sacrificing scientific objectivity? Beyond that, is it not possible to be reasonably objective without being formally scientific? Can the discipline help in moving toward the good life?

The purpose of this argument is to raise questions, with the aim of generating recognition that political science should indeed engage in the substance of policy. It does not attempt to determine the form of this engagement, which of course would vary according to the specialty and preference of each investigator.

There are exceptions to the reluctance to engage in policy. We will examine two: one was an effort to affect public policy for the general welfare; that is, it sought to contribute to achievement of the good life. The other is a major exception, and it comes from political philosophy rather than from political science. However major, it is only a partial exception, in that instead of speaking truth to power, it was an overt seizure of power in a manner that suppressed any truth directed its way.

First, consider again the example of Jacob Hacker. He is an exception among political scientists; one who has not let disciplinary prejudice prevent him from being active in health policy. Not only do his studies concentrate on the issue, but he has been a key adviser on health care reform to policy makers. He made substantial contributions to the Affordable Care Act, and subsequently examined just how reform took place, how it was that the legislation emerged as it did, why there was such enormous polarization, and what were the specific obstacles that the bill faced.¹²

¹² Jacob Hacker, "The Road to Somewhere: Why Health Reform Happened," *Perspectives on Politics*, 8:3 (2010), 861-876.

He dealt with the effort it took, and considered whether it had been worth it. There were intense pressures on his private life, but, however much “the healthcare bill was incomplete and imperfect in many ways,” he was happy that he made the decision to participate. The law that emerged was, he argued, “a vital first step.” He thus had no “regrets about stepping into the realm of policy advocacy.”¹³

Given America’s political dynamics at the time, the Affordable Care Act probably was about all that could have been accomplished. For a full century, progressives and others had sought universal health care. The effort began when former president Theodore Roosevelt, in the unlikely venue of Osawatimie, Kansas in 1910, gave what was arguably the most progressive speech by any president in history (or in his case, former and hopeful future president). The substance of that rousing talk became the foundation of his 1912 “Bull Moose” program. Decades passed. When, in 2010 the Affordable Care Act passed after a century of failed efforts, many impediments were to have been expected, and should surprise no one that they shaped and weakened the legislation.

It should be clear that Hacker was grateful for the way the universities where he had been based had treated him, and had nothing for praise for the support he had received. Many scholars had supported him “tirelessly,” he said, and he gave them hearty tribute. His own personal situation had been all that he could have hoped. Nevertheless, he had to make it plain—as though it were not

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 872.

already apparent to those in the discipline—that “this sort of work is not highly valued within political science.”

Certainly, he said, the reason for this “may seem self-evident—policy recommendations seem to be a breach of objectivity and a distraction from real scholarship.” There is no doubt that this is true, but “that does not explain why academic economists routinely engage with public issues while political scientists appear more reticent. Political scientists,” he stressed, “have the potential to say at least as much as economists do about how institutions and policies are structured—and might be better structured—as economists do.” He reminded political scientists that “our profession once had far less reluctance about speaking the truth that it discovered to the power that it studied.”

Hacker’s example demonstrates what could be. He deserves our praise for what he has accomplished, and also for making it plain that political science has great unrealized potential. Certainly, he can serve as a model for those seeking a more engaged political science.

The second example, as indicated, comes from political philosophy. Rather than demonstrating the capacity for public good, however, it should be taken as a warning that the potential of a more engaged political science is not all on the beneficial side of the ledger; there is potential for harm as well.

Emerging from that example was one of the greatest foreign-policy disasters in American history, the war in Iraq. It no doubt had become inevitable because the Republican officeholders, with assistance from many Democrats,

threw caution aside and insisted on pursuing it against all evidence that should have counseled caution. Political science provided no guidance whatever; political philosophy (or what purported to be political philosophy) encouraged the reckless adventure. An early candidate for the party's 2016 nomination was Jeb Bush, the brother of the president, George W. Bush, who had taken the country into that war. The former president's brother had trouble answering whether he would have taken us into that war, and essentially his response was that he would have, *even if he knew then what he now knows*.

The story of the road into that war is uniquely one built upon what bears many of the marks of a cabal, one from deep within perhaps the most obscure segment of political philosophy in America. The story is not complete without examining how that group emerged from the ivory tower to capture the foreign policy of a presidential administration. The late Leo Strauss, perhaps more even than most superb teachers, had many students, most of them admiring students. Those behind what almost could be branded a coup were more than Strauss's students, or students of his students, they were, as Anne Norton puts it, disciples.¹⁴ We can use the name they apply to themselves, "Straussians." Norton says she is sorry for the name "Straussian," because "it implicates Strauss in views that were not always his own, but it is best to call people what they call themselves. Straussian is the name these disciples have taken. The Straussians have made a conscious and deliberate effort to shape politics and

¹⁴ Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2004, p. 6.

learning in the United States and abroad.”¹⁵ Their detractors argue that they bear the marks of a cult: insistence on across-the-board agreement, willingness to shun those whom they consider apostates, the practice of taking over academic departments by gaining positions of authority, and then by employing only other Straussians, and so forth.

Those who self identify as Straussians have formed their own society, taking over academic departments, securing key governmental positions, and going far beyond what their master taught. The teaching skill of Straussians is legendary. I can vouch for this, because during my doctoral work, I had five courses from a professor who had studied with Strauss himself at the University of Chicago. The technique that they employ is close textual analysis, concentrating upon classic writings, and ignoring secondary interpretations of those writings. They read slowly and deliberately, going over their selected material line by line. Norton says that Strauss taught American students a new way to read a text that was a very old way.¹⁶ It is “a way of reading that has fallen out of favor in the universities,” but in the *shul*, the *madrassa*, in seminaries and in Bible study groups, sacred texts are still studied in this way.”¹⁷ This can lead to fascinating teaching, and to deep insights. It also, however, denies students the insights that may come from other scholars, and risks leaving them to make the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

same mistakes that previous scholars have made without any correction that could be available from subsequent wealth of scholarship.

The more questionable aspects of Strauss's teaching come from his notion of hidden messages. Strauss taught that the masters of political philosophy wrote overtly for the masses, but covertly in the same texts for those capable of understanding and dealing with the disguised truths. Those truly capable readers, of course, were the Straussians. Strauss taught the search for truth, but also accepted the necessity of the "noble lie."

"Straussians" tend to have much in common besides having studied with Strauss or having studied with those who did. They reflect a preoccupation with national strength, and advocate aggressive foreign policies. They also appear to be especially concerned—here I carefully avoid the pejorative "obsessed"—with a version of masculinity that Harvey Mansfield, Jr., describes in his book of that name as "manliness."¹⁸ This is somewhat odd, because many Straussians, while strongly urging military action on the part of others, avoid military service or anything exposing them to personal risk.

Take Mansfield, himself, for example. He is a widely respected political philosopher, but his life seems hardly to be one that would lead him to extol "manliness." To be sure, his definition: maintaining "confidence in risky situations," is a worthy quality, but is one that surely is reasonably distributed between the sexes. Mansfield has no experience in the military, and in fact has spent virtually his entire life at Harvard. Not only does he teach there, but he lived

¹⁸ Harvey Mansfield, Jr., *Manliness*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

there growing up when his father before him was on the Harvard faculty. This was no doubt somewhat responsible for the tone of Walter Kirn's review of *Manliness* in the *New York Times*. Kirn seems to have difficulty deciding whether to be amused or astonished by Mansfield's "fussy" treatment of a subject that would seem not to come naturally to him.¹⁹ Similarly, Mansfield did himself no favors with his answers to "Questions for Harvey C. Mansfield: Of Manliness and Men," by Deborah Solomon, in *The New York Times Magazine*.²⁰

Presumably he was attempting to be humorous, but it isn't clear. Asked if his "left-leaning colleagues" were willing to talk with him, he said that people listened to him, but didn't pay attention. "I should punch them out, but I don't." Dick Cheney, he said, was manly, because "he hunts. And he curses openly." Asked when was the last time he did something that required physical strength, he replied: "It's true that nothing in my career requires physical strength, but in my relations with women, yes."

"Such as"? Solomon asked.

"Lifting things, opening things," he said. "My wife is quite small."

There you have it. Perhaps mentioning Theodore Roosevelt here could be seen as a digression, but it is one that is directly relevant to this discussion of

¹⁹ Walter Kirn, "Who's the Man?: Review, 'Manliness,' by Harvey C. Mansfield, *New York Times Books* (19 March 2006), <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/19/books/reviews/19kirn.html> ; retrieved 1 June 2015.

²⁰ "Questions for Harvey C. Mansfield: Of Manliness and Men," Interview by Deborah Solomon, *New York Times Magazine* (12 March 2006), http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/12/magazine/312wwln_q4.ht ; retrieved 1 June 2015.

Straussians. TR was assistant secretary of the navy, which put him in the number two position of what was then a cabinet department. He resigned that post in order to fight physically—to accept a combat position in the Spanish-American War, a war that he had encouraged—so that he put himself in the place of danger along with others who were there in a conflict that he had urged upon the nation. As William Harbaugh remarked, TR “had read the bulk of his own country’s literature and knew personally perhaps a majority of the nation’s best writers.” This not only was a “rare quality in any man of action, but was a “unique quality in a President.” No one else, regardless of the pretensions of the Straussians, has practiced what Harbaugh so aptly calls “virile intellectualism.”²¹ That made it possible, as biographer John Milton Cooper remarked, for TR to “pursue during his presidency what historian Jacob Burkhardt had called ‘the state as a work of art’.”²² These accomplishments could have been worthy of praise from Strauss, himself; certainly, though, no Straussian has duplicated or come close to them, except, perhaps in their own imaginations. Paul Wolfowitz, for example, long before the Bush-Cheney administration took office, had urged that the United States attack Iraq. In the Bush-Cheney administration, as deputy secretary of defense, Wolfowitz was in a position to a large extent paralleling that which TR had held. Can any sober observer seriously believe that Wolfowitz ever for a

²¹ William H. Harbaugh, *The Life and Times of Theodore Roosevelt*, rev ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 434; quoted in Max J. Skidmore, *Presidential Performance*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004, p. 183.

²² Max J, Skidmore, *ibid.*, 9. 195; for Cooper’s original comment, see John Milton Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest*, Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1983, pp. 87-88.

second entertained the thought that he, personally, should be in physical danger in the war for which he had been so enthusiastic?

However snide it may sound, perhaps Norton was not exaggerating when she wrote of her experience with Straussians in graduate classes, that “tiny little men with rounded shoulders would lean back in their chairs and declare that Nature had made men superior to women. Larger, softer, men, with soft white hands that never held a gun or changed a tire, delivered disquisitions on manliness. They were stronger, they were smarter, and Aristotle had said so. This may not have been entirely successful in warding off the evil eye of sexual rejection, but it seemed to furnish some consolation.”²³

Norton lists a huge number of Straussians who have held positions in think tanks, lobbying firms, and political actions as well as Republican administrations from Ford and Reagan through—especially—that of George W. Bush. “This is no scattered and disorderly influence,” Norton writes. “There is [this was in 2004] a powerful and long-standing Straussian presence at several sites. The first is military. Straussians shape policy at the Department of Defense.” Paul Wolfowitz was Deputy Secretary, and there were many others there, such as Richard Perle, who were influential, and they were heavily represented in intelligence as well. I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby, Vice President Cheney’s key aide, was a Straussian. Another, William Kristol, former aide to Vice President Dan Quayle, was one of the founders of the Project for a New American Century.

²³ Norton, p. 63.

In George W. Bush's first term, journalists began sounding warnings about the Straussians, the neo-conservatives. Writing in *The New York Times*, James Atlas identified an American school of thought that saw the Iraq invasion as "nothing less than a defense of Western civilization—as interpreted by the late classicist and political philosopher, Leo Strauss (Atlas spoke of the "neo-cons," as "Leo-Cons"). He noted that President Bush paid tribute at the conservative think tank the American Enterprise Institute to the "cohort of journalists, political philosophers, and policy wonks known—primarily to themselves—as Straussians. 'You are some of the best brains in our country,' Mr. Bush declared." Bush went on to say, "my government employs about 20 of you."

Atlas noted that many would argue that "employs" is too weak, and that Bush's foreign policy seemed to them to be "entirely a Straussian creation." He cited Wolfowitz, and Bill Kristol, "founding editor of *The Weekly Standard*, a must-read in the White House. He asked how the obscure Strauss came to be the motivating fact of the neo-conservatives, and said that it stemmed from the publication of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* in 1967. Bloom was a student of Strauss's, and although his polemic was not a call to action, it was "a celebration of the classics as a civilizing force," and the agenda "became politicized when it was appropriated—some might say hijacked—by a cohort of ambitious men for whom the university was too confining an arena." Although

Strauss might not have favored the policies of his disciples, he served as the symbol that motivated our rush to war.²⁴

Almost at the same time as Atlas's article in the *New York Times* came another, this time in *The New Yorker*.²⁵ Seymour Hersh wrote that "they call themselves self-mockingly, the Cabal—a small cluster of policy advisers and analysts now based in the Pentagon's Office of Special Plans." Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz had conceived the operation that within the previous year had "brought about a crucial change of direction in the American intelligence community." Beginning their work after 9/11, they "helped shape public opinion and American policy toward Iraq," relying heavily on information from other agencies, "and also on information provided by the Iraqi National Congress, or I.N.C., the exile group headed by Ahmad Chalabi." Rapidly, the group came to rival "both the C.I.A. and the Pentagon's own Defense Intelligence Agency, the D.I.A., as President Bush's main source of intelligence regarding Iraq's possible possession of weapons of mass destruction and connection with Al Qaeda."

As of that writing, no such weapons had been found, and much of the intelligence was already in question. Now, more than a decade later, it is clear that there was nothing to be found, and that the information was more than questionable; it was totally false.

²⁴ See James Atlas, "The nation: Leo-Cons; A Classicists Legacy: New Empire Builders," *The New York Times*, "Week in Review," (4 May 2003), <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/04> ; retrieved 1 June 2015.

²⁵ Seymour M. Hersh, "Selective Intelligence: Donald Rumsfeld has his own special sources. Are they reliable?" *The New Yorker* , "Annals of National Security," (12 May 2003); <http://www.newyorker.com/magazi> ; retrieved 1 June 2015.

The head of the Office of Special Plans was a Straussian, Abram Shulsky, who had been a staff member on the Senate Intelligence Committee in the early 1980s, and had worked with Richard Perle when Perle was assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan administration. Pentagon sources told Hersh that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his colleagues believed that the C.I.A. was unable to perceive the reality of the situation in Iraq,” and that Special Plans therefore was to examine CIA information and “reveal what the intelligence community can’t see. Shulsky’s carrying the heaviest part.”

This it did, providing support for “what Wolfowitz and his boss, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld believed to be true—that Saddam Hussein had close ties to Al Qaeda, and that Iraq had an enormous arsenal of chemical, biological, and possibly even nuclear weapons that threatened the region, and, potentially, the United States.” Unfortunately, “there was a close personal bond, too, between Chalabi and Wolfowitz and Perle dating back many years. Their relationship deepened after the Bush administration took office, and Chalabi’s ties extended to others in the administration, including Rumsfeld; Douglas Feith, the Under-Secretary of Defense for Policy; and I. Lewis Libby, Vice-President Dick Cheney’s chief of staff.” There were other ties, also. Chalabi and his group through the years had received millions of dollars from the CIA, but those funds halted around 1996 when the CIA came to doubt Chalabi’s integrity, and those in the agency recognized that his group was a “political unit—not an intelligence agency,” and manipulated information for its own purposes.

Norton writes that the “necessarily intimate links between defense and intelligence enhance the influence of the Straussians, for Straussians have a prominent place in the intelligence community.” Shulsky, she says, is “the most prominent of these,” but notes there are many others as well. “Gary Schmitt has occupied several positions in the intelligence community. Carnes Lord now teaches at the Naval War College. Straussians have also advised congressional committees on intelligence. Each of these sources of influence reinforces and extends the others” and in fact Straussians have written many of the speeches of Republican secretaries of defense, vice presidents, and even presidents.²⁶

Hersh remarks that it may not be “immediately obvious” just how Strauss’s views might pertain to intelligence gathering, but that “Shulsky himself explored that question in a 1999 essay, written with Gary Schmitt, entitled ‘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.” Shulsky and Schmitt argued that Strauss’s notion of hidden meanings suggests the deception that is at the heart of political life.

Regardless of whether Strauss and his ideas may or may not be directly related to the preoccupations of the Straussians, those outside the group should be able to view them with fewer presuppositions, and thus be more objective in their conclusions. A number of former intelligence operatives, according to Hersh, “believe that Shulsky and his superiors were captives of their own convictions, and were merely deceiving themselves.” They really have no friends other than

²⁶ Norton, p. 18.

those within their own group, and they constantly reinforce one another. This is certainly plausible. As Hersh notes, “this has been going on since the nineteen-eighties, but they’ve never been able to coalesce as they have now. September 11th gave them the opportunity, and now they’re in heaven. They believe the intelligence is there. They want to believe it. It *has* to be there.”

But it wasn’t. Strauss would likely have known better. Norton goes to the heart of the issue. “The idealization of the state of Israel was the work of Straussians, not of Strauss. The alliance with Christian fundamentalists in a latter-day crusade against Islam was the work of Straussians, not of Strauss.”²⁷ Before Strauss, Norton writes, the dominant account in the US of political philosophy was that of George Sabine (although Mulford Sibley’s *Political Ideas and Ideologies* is the better treatment). It was entirely European in its orientation. “In Strauss and Cropsey, things are otherwise,” she says. “There are chapters on Plato, Aristotle, and Kant, and there are chapters on al Farabi and Maimonides. The chapter on Marsilius of Padua, written by Strauss himself, notes the importance of ibn Rushd to an understanding of Christian and European thought.” In fact, Norton says, “Strauss revived the study of Islamic philosophy in the West.”²⁸ Kristol and others can present “the meeting of Islam and West,” as “defenders of civilization against civilization’s opponents,” or as George W. Bush cast it, “as a crusade. Nothing in Strauss’s writing endorses a Judeo-Christian

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 224-225.

crusade against Islam. Strauss saw Jewish and Muslim philosophy as closely linked. . . .”²⁹

In 2015, when Republicans vying for their party’s presidential nomination of 2016 were having to deal with the incentives for going to war in Iraq, many argued, incorrectly, that everyone agreed at the time that Saddam Hussein had “weapons of mass destruction,” and that he had ties to al Qaeda. The attacks on 9/11 meant that Iraq posed a massive threat to the United States, and that it was reasonable to assume that the United States had to remove Hussein from power.

Few people now remember that PNAC, the Project for a New American Century, was urging invasion of Iraq long before 9/11, and in fact, before the administration of George W. Bush came to power, or was even elected. The PNAC was a Washington, D.C. think tank that Bill Kristol and Robert Kagan formed in 1997. By all accounts, it was a neo-conservative (read “Straussian”) organization—which, considering who the founders were, was to have been expected. It lasted until 2006, when it was officially dissolved, soon to be superseded by a “Foreign Policy Initiative.” Kristol was the chair, and the directors included Kagan, and John Bolton, who was to become George W. Bush’s irascible ambassador to the UN by recess appointment.

Other directors were Devon Gaffney Cross and Bruce P. Jackson, while Gary Schmitt was “executive director of the Project.” In September of 2000, during the last year of the Clinton administration, PNAC issued a report of some 90 pages, calling for increased military expenditures. Although it noted that the

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

US was the sole remaining superpower, and no longer faced a powerful antagonist, it urged expanding the military in order to maintain world domination. The tone was alarmist, and suggested that threats flourished. The core missions that it called for were to defend the homeland; “fight and decisively win multiple, simultaneous major theater wars;” perform “constabulary” duties for the world; and “transform U.S. forces to exploit the ‘revolution in military affairs.’” The latter had to do with “rebuilding” forces that were “ill-prepared,” adapting new equipment, and translating “U.S. military supremacy into American geopolitical preeminence.” It called for increasing military budgets by more than a third.³⁰ The list of project participants numbered 27, including the three Kagans (Donald, the father, of Yale, and his sons Fred, of the US Military Academy at West Point, and Robert, of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace). Others included Abram Shulsky, then of the RAND Corporation, Paul Wolfowitz, then at SAIS, Johns Hopkins, and I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby, later to become Vice President Cheney’s powerful chief of staff.

On January 26, 1998, the PNAC sent what can only be described as an arrogant letter to President Clinton. It charged that his administration’s Iraq policy was dangerously inadequate, and called openly for war.

“The only acceptable strategy,” it said, was “one that eliminates the possibility that Iraq will be able to use or threaten to use weapons of mass

³⁰ Donald Kagan and Gary Schmitt (Project Co-Chairmen); Thomas Donnelly (Principal Author), *Rebuilding America’s Defenses: Strategy, Forces, and Resources for a New Century*,” A Report of Program for a New American Century, September, 2000; see esp. pp. 26ff.

destruction. In the near term, this means a willingness to undertake military action as diplomacy is clearly failing. In the long term, it means removing Saddam Hussein and his regime from power. That now needs to become the aim of American foreign policy.”³¹

Those who signed the letter numbered 18, most were Republicans, and all were those who had held, or were to hold, key positions in the military and intelligence establishments of Republican administrations. Straussians were prominent among them, as were those who later were to use 9/11 as an excuse for the administration of George W. Bush to invade Iraq. Francis Fukuyama, Robert Kagan, William Kristol, Richard Perle, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz were to become especially famous, or infamous.

The following month, PNAC sent yet another letter to President Clinton.³² This one reiterated the weaknesses, as the signatories saw them, of the policies toward Iraq, and repeated the demands of the first letter. It expanded those demands to say that the “vital national interests of our country require the United States,” among other things, “to: Recognize a provisional government of Iraq based on the principles and leaders of the Iraqi National Congress (INC),” and followed with the laughable description of INC—Chalabi’s political interest group—as “representative of all the peoples of Iraq.” The letter ended with a flourish to the effect that the policies it recommended would “save ourselves and the world.”

³¹ Available at <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article5527.htm> ; retrieved 1 June 2015.

³² Available at <http://www.iraqwatch.org/perspectives/rumsfeld-openletter.htm> ; retrieved 1 June 2015.

The latter missive had even more signers, 40 in all, still nearly all Republicans, and still many Straussians. They included former and future cabinet members, significant names from publishing, members of Congress, the defense establishment, and the intelligence and diplomatic communities—again, from former or future Republican administrations. Among them were: Eliot Abrams, Richard V. Allen, John Bolton, Frank Carlucci, William Clark, Doug Feith, Frank Gaffney, Fred C. Ikle, Robert Kagan, William Kristol, Robert McFarlane, Donald Rumsfeld, Gary Schmitt, Caspar Weinberger, and Paul Wolfowitz. Nearly all of those who signed the first letter signed the second one also. It is ironic—considering the high opinion that Straussians tend to have with regard to their own intellects—that this letter’s gushing confidence in Chalabi’s INC reflects not brilliance, but naiveté.

Based upon these clear statements from the PNAC, there is no doubt that the will to invade Iraq was there long before 9/11. The same powerful voices that participated in the decision to invade Iraq after 9/11, years earlier were urging a different—and apparently more prudent and less ideological—administration to invade Iraq. They were urging this without the excuse of the traumatic events that took place early in the second Bush’s first term.

For purposes of the argument here, it is sufficient to have examined the PNAC, and its role in attempting to stimulate action against Iraq long before the administration of the second Bush. It should not be assumed, though, that this was the beginning of Straussian efforts to push the United States into a war against an Arab state that posed no threat to America. It takes little digging to

trace such efforts back long before PNAC was even formed. Any thoughtful and thorough study of the first Gulf War will discern the pernicious efforts of Straussians in positions of authority. Similar analyses of the Reagan administration will reveal the influence of Straussians to shape, and add belligerence to American foreign policy more than a quarter century before 9/11.

Virtually all authorities now recognize what should have been clear at the time, that Iraq was in no way involved in 9/11. Moreover, it seems odd for the United States of America, the most powerful nation-state in world history, to react with near hysterical fear of a small, poorly-developed, country in the Middle East with very limited resources. Regardless, political scientists should have been able to supply crucial information that would have corrected the Bush administration's misstatements that were duly repeated in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*.

Surely, the discipline should encourage its Jacob Hackers, and begin again to contribute to sound policy formation across the board, as Hacker did in the realm of health care. What he did was to contribute ideas and sound principles; to improve policy.

The discipline also should have been in a position to counter the ideological influence of the Straussians. What they were doing was not to contribute ideas for the purpose of improving policy. The study of political philosophy had led a cultish group to inflict great damage. The Straussians were not speaking truth to power. They were demonstrating their own hunger for

power. Political science did nothing to halt them, nothing to alert the public, nor anything even to alert others within the discipline.

In 2016, the dynamic was, if anything, potentially even more destructive, and political science was equally impotent. The Republican candidate came from outside, he appealed to, and represented, the worst features of American culture: xenophobia, racism, scorn for all opponents, bullying of women and the disabled, and on and on. The news media gave him constant coverage, but as an entertainer, not as a serious political figure. No warning came from the academy.

There was no attention to the effect of a quarter century of demonization of Hillary Clinton that led many voters to think a vote for Trump would be preferable because they associated *her* with scandal. There was no response from political science when the press reported that “political scientists” viewed Senator Sanders as representing views too far out of the mainstream to be acceptable. “Political scientists,” though, according to some scholars who should have known better, were admonished not to respond. A response indicating that there was disagreement among political scientists would have been unacceptable; it would be “partisan,” or “biased.”

Those familiar with American political history should easily have recognized that Senator Sanders was more mainstream in his views than popular discussion indicated. He expressed views consistent with those of the New Deal, Fair Deal, and Great Society—his views in fact were less “radical” than those of the “Bull Moose” platform of Theodore Roosevelt in 1912 or Richard Nixon’s call for a guaranteed annual income. Yet to some offended political scientists, a

simple evaluation of the Sanders program was not possible; it was not “scientific.”

Perhaps the most revealing response to the observation about the characteristics of the Sanders proposals was an attempt at humor. It sarcastically mentioned the “scientific breakthrough” that the observation represented, and said, “it’s huge that we are finally able to classify policy proposals in a common left-right policy space all the way back to the early 20th century. How many bills have you coded from Theodore Roosevelt to the present?” it asked. “Would you share the methodology of how you figured this out? When will the data be available?”

The “methodology of how this was figured out,” was simple. An intelligent reading of platforms made the conclusion obvious, although to be sure it required a familiarity with American political history as well as with the Sanders proposals. The one making the comment was too single-minded, or perhaps too simple-minded, to recognize that many things can be readily clear, that face-validity exists.

Then, because of the dynamics of American politics that political scientists overlooked, the electoral college brought us President Donald J. Trump. To borrow words from Trump, himself, “who could have known?”