Sanders, Trump and The Spiritual Death of Leo Strauss

At the Feb 25th Democratic Presidential Debate, Bernie Sanders responded to his critics saying: “Occasionally it might be good to be honest about American foreign policy, and that includes acknowledging the fact that America has overthrown governments in Chile, in Guatemala, in Iran, and when dictators, whether it’s the Cubans or the Chinese do something good, you acknowledge that.”

For a few days preceding the debate, Sanders had been subject to harsh criticism in the media for his history of praising the Cuban and Nicaraguan governments, and his defense of those words, saying in regards to the Cuban revolution “it’s unfair to say that everything was bad.”

Sanders’ many detractors considered these words to be treasonous because they praised a longtime opponent of the United States in the international arena. Anti-Castro Cubans residing in Miami, Republicans, and Sanders Democratic opponents all argued that a politician who would make such statements was unfit for office.

However, this did not hurt Bernie Sanders, and polls continue to show him as a favored candidate among Democratic voters. While the media seems to view Sanders with contempt, this makes him more attractive to the public.

This seems to exactly parallel the Republican Primary Election of 2016. During a Presidential Debate with other Republican Candidates, Donald J. Trump turned to Jeb Bush and said: “Obviously the war in Iraq was a big, fat mistake, George Bush made a mistake… Obviously we can make mistakes, but that one was a beauty… We should have never been in Iraq, they lied, they said there were weapons of mass destruction. There were none and they knew that there were none.”

Of course, Trump was widely criticized by Republicans for these words, among other statements. As Trump was widely condemned by both the establishment of the Republican Party and the mainstream media, he became more popular.

Who was Leo Strauss?

The two figures often named as the ideological fathers of Neoconservativism are Irving Kristol and Leo Strauss. Irving Kristol was a New York City Trotskyist who became disillusioned by socialism during the Second World War, later headed up the CIA’s Congress for Cultural Freedom Program in the 1950s, and eventually became a Republican strategist.

Leo Strauss, however, was a very different figure. Strauss was a Jewish philosophy professor who fled to the United States during the rise of the Nazis during the 1930s. He taught at Columbia University, the New School, and eventually the University of Chicago. Prior to leaving Germany, Strauss had a significant philosophical dialogue with the Nazi jurist and legal theorist, Carl Schmitt.

Strauss’ academic work focused on the history of western philosophy, specifically the teachings of Plato and Socrates. Strauss argued that the work of the Greek philosophers had deeper meaning in the context of the era they were written, and should be reconsidered in this light.

Strauss was known to pick out students who he considered to be full of great potential, and bring them under his mentorship in a close-knit circle. Strauss told his students they were “Philosopher Kings’ intended to rule over the rest of humanity. Among those who studied under Strauss were Susan Sontag, Paul Wolfowitz, and Allan David
An article in “The Nation” described Strauss’ worldview: “Intellectuals, he believed, would have to spread an ideology of good and evil, whether they believed it or not, so that the American people could be mobilized against the enemies of freedom. For this reason Strauss, we learn in one of many telling asides, was a huge fan of the TV series Gunsmoke and its Manichean depiction of good and evil.”

Strauss wanted Americans to see the world in terms of pure black and white, good and evil. The United States was to be the infallible “shining city on a hill” and its enemies were to forces of absolute evil with no redeeming attributes. The role of intellectuals is to reduce the world to a melodrama, with a plot simple enough for the inferior classes to understand and be mobilized around. The cowboy-themed 1950’s TV show called “Gunsmoke” was according to Strauss, the ideal for how Americans should come to understand geopolitics.

Ronald Reagan was a 1950’s actor who had portrayed cowboys, and his ascendancy as President in many ways showed how deeply influential Strauss was. Reagan spoke of the Soviet Union as an “evil empire” and delivered his oval office addresses in dramatized, Hollywood sounding voice, like a silver screen sheriff rounding up a posse.

George H.W. Bush famously rebuked Bill Clinton for pointing out stagnation and economic hardships, saying: “My opponent says America is a nation in decline... Don’t let anyone tell you America is second rate, especially someone running for President.”

George W. Bush echoed the Reagan-era formulas, talking about the need to “smoke him out” regarding Osama Bin Laden, and bringing news reporters to watch him clear brush on his Texas ranch.

Former US President Barack Obama was widely criticized by Republicans as being the first President of the United States who did not believe in “American exceptionalism.” Oddly, the phrase “American Exceptionalism” was actually coined by Joseph Stalin in his repudiation of Jay Lovestone, who led a faction of the US Communist Party that rejected Moscow’s leadership.

Regardless, the rise of Trump in 2016, and the rise of Sanders in 2020, both in the face of widespread media opposition, and both of them harshly criticizing US foreign policy, seems to show that Leo Strauss’ narrative has failed.

Americans simply do not see the USA as the infallible protagonist in a 1950’s western TV program, and they clearly don’t want a President who talks like one either. Poll after poll shows that the US public disapproves of foreign military entanglements and distrusts the mainstream media.

As the 2020 election approaches, with Trump accusing Sanders of being a “Communist” and Trump believed by many of his supporters to be waging some kind of shadow war against the “deep state,” political strategists will be forced to cut their teeth on very new political terrain.

Americans no longer believe in American exceptionalism, and appealing to it just does not seem to work anymore.

Caleb Maupin is a political analyst and activist based in New York. He studied political science at Baldwin-Wallace College and was inspired and involved in the Occupy Wall Street movement, especially for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.

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