

---

---

A 25th Anniversary: But of What?

## *Allan Bloom and Straussian Alienation*

**Claes G. Ryn**

*The Catholic University of America*

The reaction of putative conservatives to the publication of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* in 1987 was symptomatic of deep intellectual confusion. They treated the book as a defense of the American political tradition and the values of Western civilization—as a work of conservative thought. Some of these conservatives may have based their assessment only on excerpts from the book in which Bloom criticized spineless academic administrators and the drug and rock culture, but not even these sections were a clear indication of conservatism. Sentiments of this kind could have been expressed by people ranging from moderate liberals to communists and reactionaries. Although some on the left attacked the book, it was very different from its reputation among supposed conservatives. Curiously, it did not make them suspicious that a book by one of their own should receive an extraordinary amount of attention and be treated with high respect in places where conservative ideas were ordinarily disdained.

When *Modern Age* invited this writer to contribute to a symposium on *The Closing of the American Mind*, I tried to show that it was not a defense of the traditional American mind with its classical, Christian, and British lineage and resonances, but was largely a defense of the *Enlightenment* mind.<sup>1</sup> What Bloom

---

CLAES G. RYN is Professor of Politics at the Catholic University of America, Chairman of the National Humanities Institute, Editor of *HUMANITAS*, and President of the Academy of Philosophy and Letters.

<sup>1</sup> Claes G. Ryn, "Universality or Uniformity?," *Modern Age*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (1988).

---

---

bewailed was that the Enlightenment mind, which he rather loosely and arbitrarily equated with the American mind, was closing. That mind was being threatened, he argued, by the more extreme radicalism in American universities and elsewhere that had earlier manifested itself in the New Left and counterculture of the late 1960s and early '70s. According to Bloom, this extremism had roots in certain European, especially German, intellectual currents. In typical Straussian fashion, Bloom obfuscated by implying a connection between the Enlightenment he favored and the so-called "Ancients," *as he interpreted them*. For instance, he treated Socrates as a kind of pre-Enlightenment figure.

None of this should have surprised anyone. As a Straussian, Bloom had long sought to appropriate certain iconic historical figures, giving them new intellectual profiles that would support his intellectual agenda. His likes and dislikes were revealing. His fondness for Jean-Jacques Rousseau, if nothing else, should have tipped conservatives off to his philosophical leanings. Though a complex thinker not easily classified, Rousseau had long been seen as a major influence on leftist-revolutionary movements and as a theorist of so-called totalitarian democracy. He inspired the French Jacobins, including the notorious Robespierre.<sup>2</sup> But no—when *The Closing of the American Mind* enjoyed its great success, conservatives wanted to celebrate a supposed breakthrough for conservatism.

*A familiar genre.*

Bloom's book actually took its place within an old, large and familiar genre, that of turning America and its origins, especially the so-called Founding, into something different from what they actually were. Intellectuals uncomfortable with America's traditional culture had long tried to recast and replace it. Because Americans were, when these efforts first got underway, strongly attached to that culture and had a particular fondness for the Constitution as the political essence of the American tradition, attacking these head-on was not

---

<sup>2</sup> On Rousseau's seminal contributions to totalitarianism, see, for example, J. L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (New York: Praeger, 1960). On the incompatibility of Rousseau's notion of democracy with American constitutional republicanism, see Claes G. Ryn, *Democracy and the Ethical Life*, 2nd rev. exp. ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990).

---

---

a very promising way of weaning Americans off traditional allegiances. Instead, these intellectuals adopted a strategy of deception and, in some cases, perhaps self-deception. Great energy went into persuading Americans that America's pedigree was not what it had seemed to be. America, they asserted, was not an outgrowth and continuation of Western classical and Christian civilization, as mediated by British culture, and affected also by more recent ideas. America represented a *departure* from or outright *rejection* of the bad old days of Europe. America was based not on a rich, complex, slowly evolved European heritage, but on abstract, ahistorical principles.

A prime example of this genre was Louis Hartz's 1955 book *The Liberal Tradition in America*, which declared that America is quintessentially liberal and that John Locke is pervasively paradigmatic for America. All the more thoroughly to sever America's connection to the old world, Hartz assumed an ahistorical, secularized, "enlightened," quasi-capitalist Locke. This Locke suited his intellectual purpose better than the actual Locke, whose ideas had a connection, however tenuous, with medieval thought. Bloom's book, like those of other Straussians, was yet another example of the effort to give America origins that would make it more appealing and favorable to people of enlightened views.

*Locke  
said to be  
paradigmatic  
for America.*

Whole ideologies and mythologies have grown up that draw attention away from America's actual past and make Americans of an older type, the WASPs in particular, feel defensive and even out of place, certainly not entitled to any special status. The desire to have America be something different from its historical past and to make it perhaps also more palatable to an aspiring new elite is probably most evident and explicit in Bloom's fellow Straussian Harry Jaffa. Jaffa has made a career of asserting that America must not, repeat, not, be understood as owing anything of importance to an old historical heritage. It must be seen as born out of a radical break with the past and as based on abstract principles of an essentially Lockean cast—Lockeanism understood concomitantly as a departure from earlier thought. The American Founding, Jaffa asserts, "represented the most radical break with tradition . . . that the world had seen . . . [T]he founders understood themselves to be revolutionaries, and to celebrate the

---

---

Jaffa: *Founding is radical break with tradition.*

American Founding is therefore to celebrate revolution." The American Revolution "embodied the greatest attempt at innovation that human history had recorded." This revolution was somewhat mild, Jaffa concedes, but belongs with "subsequent revolutions in France, Russia, China, Cuba or elsewhere."<sup>3</sup> There is in such statements not so much as a hint of the deep roots of the American rebellion in the old English tradition of constitutionalism and resistance to tyranny. That a particular heritage—classical, Christian, and British—decisively shaped American society and politics is for Jaffa evidently a distasteful notion. Far from being conservative of an ancient inheritance, Jaffa wants to be *rid* of America's actual past—a goal that he has pursued by arguing among the historically uneducated for his notion of an ahistorical, radical, revolutionary Founding. Bloom's view of America is similar. In *The Closing of the American Mind* he even asserts that the American Revolution was fought for the same principles as the French Revolution.<sup>4</sup> Putative American conservatives still sensed nothing particularly wrong with the book. They seemed to have been already affected by such a view of America and to have but a passing familiarity with the history of their country.<sup>5</sup>

Analogously, Bloom contends that Plato, whose iconic status and authority he would like to invoke on behalf of his own beliefs, is markedly different from how a long tradition of classicist scholarship has understood him. Contrary to all appearances, Plato is not scornful of democracy and democratic man. He is a democrat in disguise. Bloom writes about *The Republic*: "Socrates the philosopher desires democracy. He is actually engaged in a defense of democracy against its enemies."<sup>6</sup> Bloom

---

<sup>3</sup> Harry V. Jaffa, "Equality as a Conservative Principle," in William F. Buckley, Jr., and Charles R. Kesler, eds. *Keeping the Tablets: Modern American Conservative Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 86.

<sup>4</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 158.

<sup>5</sup> For an historically based examination of the frame of mind that made the American colonists favor separation from England, see Joseph Baldacchino, "The Unraveling of American Constitutionalism: From Customary Law to Permanent Innovation," *Humanitas*, Vol. XVIII, Nos. 1 & 2 (2005), <http://www.nhinet.org/baldacchino18-1&2.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Allan Bloom, *Interpretive Essay*, in *The Republic of Plato*, Transl., with Notes and an Interpretive Essay, by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 421.

---

---

similarly tries to claim the old normative idea of “nature,” which appeared among the Greeks and eventually became central to the natural law tradition. To recast this idea and infuse it with content more pleasing to him, Bloom draws in part on Rousseau’s primitivistic notion of “nature,” which is at the core of Rousseau’s wholesale attack on traditional Western civilization, especially its moral-spiritual heritage. Rousseau constructed the sharpest possible contrast between nature and tradition. Really to respect nature is to be *hostile* to tradition.

Leo Strauss, the teacher of Bloom and Jaffa, is not enamored of Rousseau or Locke, but his basic understanding of philosophy radiates distrust of tradition. He insists that real philosophizing is incompatible with according tradition respect, except in the limited sense that the philosophers, whose real thoughts are always a threat to tradition, may have to pay lip service to it to protect themselves against resentment. The philosopher is not concerned with history, Strauss contends, but with the universal, which is, in his estimation, by definition ahistorical, abstract. To philosophize, Strauss insists, is to disavow the traditional, the conventional, the ancestral. To philosophize is to consider “universal or abstract principles” and always has “a revolutionary, disturbing, unsettling effect.” There is that idea again: What has evolved historically imperils goodness and truth. Strauss wants it understood that philosophy “tends to prevent men from wholeheartedly identifying themselves with, or accepting the social order that fate has allotted them. *It tends to alienate them from their place on the earth.*”<sup>7</sup> To philosophize is to become more or less alienated from the surrounding society. It seems for Strauss unacceptable that tradition at its best—as a kind of summing up of the findings of generations—might actually *help* intellectually and otherwise limited human beings to *find* universality and to achieve an intrinsically worthwhile existence. Joseph Cropsey, with whom Strauss co-edited a famous reader in political philosophy, echoes this prejudice against tradition. Expounding a Straussian conception of nature, Cropsey writes: “The conventional is *antithetical* to the natural.” When conservatism respects convention and tradition, Cropsey adds, “it can be

*For Strauss, philosophy is anti-traditional.*

---

<sup>7</sup> Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 13-14 (emphasis added).

---

---

said to abjure nature and reason.”<sup>8</sup>

Strauss and the Straussians thus go to great lengths denying any connection between philosophy and the universal, on the one hand, and tradition and the historical, on the other. To regard tradition as in any sense authoritative is to be guilty of the philosophical and moral offense of “historicism.” Claiming yet again the support of an iconic figure for his thinking, Bloom writes in *The Closing of the American Mind* with specific reference to what Aristotle is supposed to have believed: “The essence of philosophy is the abandonment of all authority in favor of individual human reason.”<sup>9</sup> Another ancient thinker is here found to have anticipated the modern notion of reason that Bloom favors. His Aristotle looks very different from the Aristotle who emphasized the social and political nature of man and philosophized about politics on the basis of a comparative historical study of regimes.

Whence this Straussian unwillingness to consider that philosophy and morality might have something to *gain* from weighing historical evidence, most generally the experience of the human race and, more particularly, the experience of classical and Christian civilization? Whence this assumption that tradition must contradict and threaten philosophy?

*Tradition  
central to  
Christianity.*

Christian civilization fostered a rather different attitude towards tradition. It negated any sharp dichotomy between philosophy/universality and history. A sense of preserving and transmitting a heritage is integral to Christianity. *Remembrance* of sacred events and how they inspired the Christian community is central to the Christian intellectual and moral sensibility. Particularly in its more Catholic and Orthodox strains, Christianity has regarded tradition as one of its pillars. For Thomas Aquinas, natural law, which he regards as accessible not only to Christians, tends to coincide with custom.<sup>10</sup> One of the obvious reasons for taking a sympathetic interest in history is that, according to Christianity, the Universal and the historical became one. The Word became flesh. In keeping with the notion that the divine was incarnated, Christians have

---

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Cropsey, *Political Philosophy and the Issues of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 117-18 (emphasis added in the first quotation).

<sup>9</sup> Bloom, *Closing*, 253.

<sup>10</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *Treatise on Law*, esp. Qu. 97.

---

---

been sensitive to history being more than an amorphous flux. They have looked for and tried to realize as much as possible of life's higher meaning not in the intellectual abstract, but in concrete, historical action. Though it has not been unencumbered by rationalistic leanings, Christianity greatly modified the over-intellectualization of the moral-spiritual life and the philosophical ahistoricism to which the ancient Greeks, especially Plato, were prone. "By their fruits ye shall know them" means to Christians that the spirit manifests itself first of all in things concretely done. In its encounter with more abstract, rationalistic modern thinking, Christian civilization generated a heightened awareness of the higher aspects and potentialities of man's historical existence, a more acute, self-consciously historical view of life and of how, despite the chronic perversities and limits of human life, the universal might find expression in the particular. Edmund Burke strongly defends tradition, not, as Strauss clumsily alleges, as a normative *alternative* to moral universality, but, on the contrary, as a source of guidance in the search for universality. Burke regards "the general bank and capital of nations and of ages," as enlivened by what he calls a "moral imagination," as an indispensable support for individually weak and imperfect human beings in trying to discern and realize true universality.<sup>11</sup> Christian thinkers have not been alone in concluding that, as Burke argues, a purely abstract universality is an artificial and potentially tyrannical construct.<sup>12</sup>

It is hardly implausible to think that humanity has something to learn from its own experience and that it might over time evolve an improved sense of what makes life worth living. Why, then, is it so important to the mentioned Straussians to portray any such philosophical leanings as the product of an inferior, less than philosophical mind-set? Why their strong desire to pit what they call philosophy against tradition? Why

*Whence the  
Straussian  
anti-traditionalism?*

---

<sup>11</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 76.

<sup>12</sup> For an in-depth philosophical discussion of the possible synthesis of universality and particularity, as conceived in a "value-centered historicism," and for a discussion of the weakness and danger of abstract conceptions of universality, see Claes G. Ryn, *A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World* (Columbia and London: The University of Missouri Press, 2003).

---

---

must philosophy be conceived as inseparable from alienation from society and even as inducing a revolutionary disposition? Why are the Straussians not content with something like Burke's admission that tradition is but a guide and nowhere the final word and with his recognition that in a stagnant society tradition may become stultifying or perverse. It would appear that the Straussian discomfort with tradition does not have merely philosophical origins. It suggests a psychological predisposition to view a society's culture as inevitably threatening or hostile. It is as if the mentioned Straussians thought that only by disparaging and otherwise undermining the ways of the society in which they find themselves could they hope to achieve the influence or status to which they feel entitled. One wonders if, for these Straussians, the "philosopher" with his allegedly noble alienation and disdain for tradition is in effect a representative and spearhead for a rising elite that is trying to replace another.

*Straussian  
notion of  
universality  
inimical to  
particularity.*

Members of the Frankfurt School are known for their attacks on traditional authority and the "authoritarian personality," just as Marx and Lenin before them exuded alienation and revolutionary sentiment. Because of the reputation of the Straussians, it might seem far-fetched to regard them as radicals in any sense, but, whatever the best way to describe them, they do in their disparagement of tradition resemble the open, unqualified left. Their ostensible defense of universality or "natural right" seems to connect them with more traditional views, but, as has been shown, they define universality or natural right abstractly and in *contradistinction* to historical particularity and individuality. That universality and history might be synthesized, as assumed, for example, in the Christian notion of incarnation, is for them unacceptable, even inconceivable. In the Straussian conception, the universal must be empty of specific, historical content. Having dismissed Burkean "historicism" in *Natural Right and History* and associated it with the pernicious "moderns," Strauss aligns himself with the "ancients," *as he understands them*. He writes: "The quarrel between the ancients and the moderns concerns eventually, and perhaps even from the beginning, the status of 'individuality.'" <sup>13</sup> To attribute to individuality or particularity

---

<sup>13</sup> Strauss, *Natural Right*, 323.



---

---

any kind of higher significance or authority is to have succumbed to “historicism,” than which there is no greater philosophical failing. It must here be conceded that the ancients, especially Plato, did have an undeveloped sense of the intimate connection between particularity and universality, but Strauss introduced his dichotomy long after philosophy had broached and extensively discussed the possibility of a synthesis of the two. His dichotomy is therefore more deliberate and radical than anything that the ancients could have advocated.

The criticism of “historicism” is one of Strauss’s most well-known and celebrated philosophical themes. He goes to great lengths to discredit respect for tradition and historical particularity. Though this is not the place to explore the topic, one might ask if Strauss was able to reconcile these philosophical efforts with his strong identification with Jewish culture and Zionism. Philosophical consistency would require that his “anti-historicism” be directed also against the tradition with which he identifies and would mean that he is undermining his own heritage. If his anti-historicism is addressed only to general audiences and directed only against competing traditions, it would not be a philosophical stance but a merely rhetorical one, part of a political strategy. A posture of that sort might have seemed appropriate when in the Germany of his youth Strauss was a member of a Zionist alternative to the Hitler youth.

*Anti-historicism, philosophical or political?*

It is a much-debated question whether, for leading Straussians, a defense of “universality” or “natural right” is merely theoretical window-dressing, hiding a kind of Nietzschean nihilism and despair or at least a deep ambivalence regarding the existence of moral universality. Be that as it may, the Straussians, including Bloom, insist that universality or nature must be understood as purely abstract. Their fondness for ahistorical, anti-traditional “principles” becomes hard to tell apart from that of the French Jacobins. These philosophical inclinations are loaded with practical ramifications. It is relevant that abstractly conceived principles typically express an impatience with the complexities of historical existence and a desire to dominate by decree. People of such “principle” tend to ignore historical circumstances and see moral and other issues in black or white.

But if Bloom and the Straussians associate philosophy with alienation and abstraction, how to explain that so many American Christians, particularly Roman Catholics, have been so attracted to their thinking? One obvious and partial explanation is that Leo Strauss and the Straussians presented themselves as defenders of the ancients, which seemed to accord with long-standing Western intellectual tradition. There are strains of Straussian thought—including a form of elitism and an apparent concern for a higher, common good in preference to narrowly economic interest—that appear to overlap with that heritage. The elements of Straussianism that most clash with the classical and Christian traditions were also typically formulated in indirect, shrouded ways that kept philosophically unsophisticated traditionalist readers from recoiling. The Straussian method of turning respected historical figures into something different from what they were was sufficiently convoluted not to arouse suspicion among such Christians. From the point of view of attracting followers among Catholics, Straussian thinking had the advantage that its anti-historicism and abstractionism could appeal to and connect with the weakest aspect of the natural law tradition, its propensity for abstract rationalism. Catholics may in addition have detected that, almost from the beginning, leading Straussians had a special and growing influence that was unexpected in supposedly conservative intellectuals. The Straussians were attacked by leftists and rigid positivists, but they simultaneously had some kind of rapport with portions of the academic establishment, and they had access to growing financial resources. Even as Catholics sensed that pleasing the leaders of this school might bring a career advantage, the smarter and better-educated among them must have felt some considerable intellectual and moral-spiritual discomfort. But, to the extent that they sensed peril, they seem to have lacked the philosophical tools to articulate just what it was and to have been, in any case, able to suppress their unease.

It should be added that some Catholics may have been attracted to the Straussian disparagement of tradition because of similar developments within their church. As became evident in connection with the Second Vatican Council, many progressive Catholics sharply challenged Church authority and argued that the Church had relied overly on tradition and resisted

---

---

modernity too strongly.

There is yet another possible explanation for the apparent paradox that Catholic intellectuals should have been attracted to Straussian alienation and anti-“historicism.” Could it be that as outsiders of a sort—as the descendants of recent arrivals in Protestant America—some Catholics found the Straussian discomfort with tradition in general and with old America and its elites in particular subtly appealing? Even if they did not need to feel greatly alienated from an essentially Christian America, they might have carried with them from their families stories or echoes, however faded, of the slights and indignities suffered at the hands of WASP America or have harbored just a vague general sense of inferiority. Did some Irish-Americans prefer to ignore America’s English origins?

The Straussians refer with apparent admiration to a few iconic American figures, whom they like to call the Founders. To give them that name is to imply that America was a new creation, that it did not really exist until the Declaration and the Constitution were written. The Founders, as presented by leading Straussians, have no deep, substantial cultural roots. They are not portrayed as having the thick historical identity of essentially British Christians living on the East Coast of America. The Straussians like to present them instead with reference to specific ideas that they supposedly held—sometimes just single phrases they used—which are typically taken out of historical context, that is, made as abstract as possible, or taken out of their context in a particular document. It seems that Straussian interpreters have been concerned to *empty* these figures of their cultural distinctiveness, specifically, of their WASPishness, and to turn them into mere embodiments of or stand-ins for abstract, formulaic notions. Their iconic status attaches, then, not to their substantive minds, characters, and imaginations, including their historically formed ideas, but to ahistorical, putatively universal “principles.”

*The Founders emptied of their culture.*

Is it frivolous to speculate that descendants of the late arrivals in America, not least the Catholic so-called ethnics, found it somehow pleasing to think with Hartz, Strauss, Jaffa, Bloom, and many others that America did not really originate with quasi-aristocratic WASPs but with abstract principles espoused by culturally almost vacuous, non-descript Founders?

*An anti-WASP alliance.*

---

---

If America is thought of as an ideological cause rather than as the creative development of a thickly constituted and ancient historical heritage, then whoever embraces the same principles is as entitled to feeling American as any WASP. To measure up, you do not have to conform to the snobbish expectations of a WASP elite, but only need to repeat certain formulas. People with a social chip on their shoulder might, in other words, have felt a kinship with Straussian theorists who clothed alienation from the old Americans in a noble-sounding advocacy of universal principles.

To the extent that Catholic ethnics more or less consciously joined with the mentioned Straussians in an alliance to diminish and dislodge the WASPs, they seem not to have worried that, despite their vast superiority in numbers, they would be the distinctly junior partners or that Straussian alienation and anti-historicism would undermine their own beliefs and general culture.

*William F. Buckley, Jr., promoted the Straussians.*

Perhaps the prime example of a prominent Catholic who rather uncritically and unsuspectingly promoted Straussianism was William F. Buckley, Jr., a central figure in the shaping of the American post-World War II conservative movement. As the founder and editor of *National Review* he could promote ideas and perspectives in a sustained manner. He could make reputations. As a gifted intellectual and polemicist he became a conservative celebrity. His well-advertised Catholicism helped pull aspiring young Catholic intellectuals in the direction that he recommended, and he did much to assist the Straussian cause. It is illustrative of Buckley's role in that regard that in 1988 he let Charles R. Kesler, a disciple of Harry Jaffa, co-edit with him a revised edition of his 1970 anthology *Modern American Conservative Thought in the Twentieth Century*. The new edition, called *Keeping the Tablets*, gave great prominence to Straussians, especially Leo Strauss and Harry Jaffa. Much of that writing, including the ideas of Harry Jaffa cited above, could not be construed as conservative in any meaningful sense. Though intellectually agile, William F. Buckley, Jr., was not prone to philosophy in the stricter sense. He cared less about philosophical veracity, precision, and consistency than about creating a broad intellectual political alliance. Trying to decide whether a thinker belonged to the good guys or the bad

---

---

guys, Buckley would go more by the person's stand on certain public policy issues than by the person's basic view of human nature and society. That Harry Jaffa supported Barry Goldwater for the presidency seemed under Buckley's loose, public-policy-oriented definition of conservatism sufficient proof that Jaffa was on the right side. Yet apparent similarities among thinkers on political issues may be quite superficial, indeed, conceal all-important differences. Supporters, for example, of "the free market," "limited government," or "liberty" may mean greatly different things by these terms and have sharply contrasting worldviews. Really to sort out questions of this type requires careful philosophical analysis, a need that becomes all the greater when trying to distinguish different meanings of such terms as "natural right," "reason," "universality," "history," and "tradition." For this kind of scrutiny and discernment Buckley was not well equipped. He was one of many supposedly conservative intellectuals who made do with a kind of near-philosophy or pretend-philosophy. He did not realize that failing to address seemingly "fine" philosophical points was a major obstacle to understanding what was what and that this deficiency was bound to produce vast intellectual confusion and have large practical consequences.

Historians will have to assess the extent to which non-philosophical factors, including social prejudice and ambition, accounted for some of the susceptibility of Catholic intellectuals to Straussian alienation and anti-"historicism." A basic lack of philosophical and historical education may have been more important. In the case of the leading Straussians, a psychology of alienation appears to have been a major factor. If we take seriously Leo Strauss's comments on the nature of philosophy, philosophizing that is not shot through by alienation is for him not really philosophy. Yet philosophers who do not approach ideas from within a psychology of social discomfort or ambition need not see any necessary connection between philosophy and alienation from the culture in which they live. They do of course recognize that the philosophical intellect is never the captive of tradition and must clash with stale and rigid convention and that the philosopher must often be critical of old or merely prevalent beliefs, but this is an elementary, virtually self-evident disposition. It does not produce an entire

*A lack of philosophical and historical education.*

---

---

philosophical mind-set, a preoccupation with undermining an existing culture and its elites and protecting yourself against the inevitable backlash. Conceiving of philosophy as having a conspiratorial dimension looks rather idiosyncratic and is out of place in thinkers who speak in the name of high principles, "nature," "universality," or "natural right."

Alienation from traditional American and Western society often surfaces in *The Closing of the American Mind*. It is palpable in Bloom's comments on the American South, a region that happens to have been especially respectful of tradition. He disdains its championing of the principle of aristocracy. Southern defenses of local community and protests against leveling and money-grubbing he dismisses as the special pleading of "snobs" and "malcontents." Yet among Southerners, too, the Straussians made recruits, though not of the more doctrinaire, enthusiastic sort.

Bloom's 1987 triumph was not due to his having written a profound analysis of the state of America. He had produced another barely veiled attack on traditional America while at the same time providing a defense of the new American establishment that is replacing the disoriented, decadent WASPs. Like Bloom, parts of the new establishment did not want to yield to even more radical forces, such as members of the New Left and the counterculture. Now that we are on the inside, they seemed to say, it is only necessary to make sure that extremists do not undermine our gains or that the WASPs will not stage a comeback.

One of today's leading literary scholars, the Harvard "new historicist" Stephen Greenblatt, feels no need to conceal his animus against what remains of the old Western world, specifically Christianity. It is not a part of his intellectual strategy to appeal to some of the conservative elements of the abdicating, essentially Christian order. He openly celebrates the destruction of traditional beliefs and structures. At first blush, Bloom might seem the antithesis of Greenblatt. After all, Bloom *criticizes* historicism, and Greenblatt approves it. But Greenblatt's historicism is very different from Burke's. The latter is indistinguishable from a *defense* of traditional Western civilization as well as of universality, though understood in a partly new way. Despite Bloom's disdain for tradition and

*A barely  
veiled attack  
on traditional  
America.*

---

---

traditional elites, self-described conservatives thought that he might be one of them. Bloom is indeed much less obvious in his attacks on old America and old Western civilization than Greenblatt, and he is not as radical as the latter in what he wants to jettison. He is also protective of aspects of the “modern,” Enlightenment mind. Yet Bloom *shares* with Greenblatt a deep prejudice, evident to any attentive reader of *The Closing of the American Mind*, against traditional Western civilization. The obfuscation that he and other Straussians have employed—notably that of using iconic Western and American figures to give themselves a distinguished and to traditionalists reassuring pedigree—proved sufficient to disarm and deceive philosophically semi-literate readers. Straussianism in general is most certainly not without merit, but the failure of so-called conservatives to discern its element of cultural radicalism and intellectual intrigue revealed a great need for philosophical and historical education.