

BOOKS

[*Our Oldest Enemy: A History of America's Disastrous Relationship With France*, John J. Miller and Mark Molesky, Doubleday, 304 pages]

French Lessons

By Robert O. Paxton

THE MYTH OF ETERNAL Franco-American friendship is fair game. John J. Miller, a journalist with *National Review*, and Mark Molesky, assistant professor of history at Seton Hall University, offer a counter-myth: that France has directed unstinting malice against America from the beginning.

The book opens with a blood-curdling narrative of the Deerfield massacre (1704), when Indians abetted by French-Canadian authorities attacked English settlers in western Massachusetts. They killed men, women, and children, scalped some of the victims and ate some of their flesh, and abducted hostages. The writing has verve, and the reader's face tingles with anger.

But Miller/Molesky's account is one-sided. It portrays Indian violence as something the French deliberately provoked and exploited. When the Anglo-Americans' Indian allies commit an atrocity, as happened under the young Washington near Pittsburgh in May 1754, it seems an unfortunate accident. Miller/Molesky see the French and Indians as aggressors, the American colonists as their innocent victims. In a broader perspective, however, the Anglo-Americans were expelling the French from North America, and the French were resisting, sometimes cruelly. The French had priority—Quebec's foundation in 1608 predated the Mayflower by a dozen years—but far fewer settlers. It seems a little forgetful to claim, "the United States does not pose and has never posed any threat to their country."

The French weren't even the first who resisted Anglo-American expansion. Spain is really "our oldest enemy." When the English colonists in the Carolinas pushed southwards after founding Charleston in 1670, using Indian surrogates to destroy Spanish forts and missions in what is now Georgia and Florida, the Spanish fought back (admittedly less vigorously than the French). In 1680, they raided English settlements near Charleston. For a similar book about "America's disastrous relationship with Spain" an author could simply trawl through history for the nasty parts: frontier conflicts in late 17th-century Florida, Spain's stranglehold on New Orleans in the late 18th century, the Alamo, the Maine, Hemingway fighting Franco in the bars of Pamplona.

So why single out France? France obviously gets the goat of many Americans. German Chancellor Schroeder surpassed Chirac in the spring of 2003, rejecting any military operation in Iraq even with UN approval. But neither he nor the Russians aroused much popular anger here. Miller/Molesky show no curiosity about this difference or about whether any of the friction with France could come from this side of the Atlantic.

Perhaps a clash of styles provokes a special virulence: the elegantly literary French condescending to nice Americans. A more likely cause is rivalry between two countries that feel entitled, as first democracies, to offer universal moral lessons. Still more likely is American over-expectation based on our aid to the French. We have indeed helped France with thousands of young lives, and in my experience most French admit they "owe their liberty" to the United States, as Jean-Marie Colombani, editor of the Paris daily *Le Monde*, wrote in his famous editorial "We are all Americans" on Sept. 13, 2001 (a passage omitted by Miller/Molesky, who denounce this article heatedly as "an anti-American diatribe of extraordinary virulence and rage"). But often we have not helped them (as in Algeria or at Suez), or helped them late (as in 1917 and 1944),

or caused "collateral damage" like the 50,000 civilian dead in French cities razed by Anglo-American aerial bombardment during World War II. We helped them when we thought it was in our interest. Nothing sours a relationship faster than one side's overdeveloped sense of largesse.

So the Franco-American story is indeed replete with conflict. What Miller/Molesky have done is furnish maximum negative spin and place most blame on the French. A good example is the famous sea battle off the east coast of England on Sept. 23, 1779, between John Paul Jones's *Bonhomme Richard* and the pride of the British Navy, HMS *Serapis*. Every American schoolboy knows Jones's proud response (probably apocryphal) to the British captain's summons to surrender: "I have not yet begun to fight!"

Jones's squadron included three French ships. One French captain, Pierre Landais, aboard *Alliance*, inexplicably held back. Later, when *Serapis* and *Bonhomme Richard* were heavily engaged, wreathed in smoke, Landais came up and fired grapeshot into both combatants. Miller/Molesky have him fire only at Jones's ship, in typical French perfidy. They credit later rumors that Landais wanted to sink Jones's ship and claim the victory for himself. They omit details that don't fit a Francophobic version. The other French captains defeated British ships, though perhaps less dashingly than Jones. No French perfidy there. As for Landais, his behavior during the trip home to Boston in *Alliance* was so bizarre (he threatened his main American supporter, Arthur Lee, with a carving knife during a quarrel over a roast turkey) that on return he was court-martialed and removed from service in the infant U.S. Navy. Many contemporaries considered Landais insane. Madness, not Frenchness, seems to have been the problem.

Miller/Molesky portray French malevolence toward Americans as so uniform and unchanging over the centuries as to seem virtually genetic. Their French are, with occasional exceptions like Lafayette and Raymond Aron, cowardly, cynical,

duplicitous, and overfed, bullies when strong and craven when weak. Their Americans are nearly always fair and well meaning. Miller/Molesky write skillfully, with a gift for pejorative shadings. Their French characters never simply “speak”; they “sneer” or “scoff.” Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin is “oily,” Marshal Pétain is “a well-groomed thug and bigot,” Napoleon a “dwarfish hero.” Count Vergennes, foreign minister in 1776, thought God “had endowed his country with a special importance.” These arrogant chauvinists all considered their country superior to others, destined to rule the world.

If Americans have similar thoughts, or deal with the French in a thin-skinned, uncooperative, or self-interested way, Miller/Molesky approve. In 1917, U.S. commanding general John J. Pershing adamantly refused to let his troops come under French supreme command (as even the British accepted in the emergency of July 1918). When Charles de Gaulle takes the identical position in 1944 or 1966, he is an unreasonable chauvinist.

French aid to the American War of Independence is the Francophile’s exhibit number one. But Miller/Molesky affirm that the French were only pursuing national self-interest in fighting the British—and they fought badly to boot. Afterwards, they showed their true colors by trying to block American westward expansion and preying upon American shipping.

But are not governments supposed to serve their perceived national interest? “Realists” or “pragmatists” in foreign policy expect nothing else. In their view, successful diplomacy is the skillful persuasion of other countries that a desired course of action is in the mutual interest—as in the important role France plays today in the NATO peacekeeping force in Afghanistan and in sharing intelligence information about terrorists with the United States. (The latter, at least, is acknowledged in this book.)

Miller/Molesky, by contrast, are idealists in foreign policy. For them, alliances rest not on interest but on

affection. They divide the world into friends and foes. A friend is not “difficult to control.” Since French governments, with broad public support, pursue an independent foreign policy, France is our foe. This book evaluates as “fawning” the admiration of American realists like Kissinger and Nixon for Charles de Gaulle, whose proud and independent France they considered generally an asset in the Cold War. An idealist foreign policy sounds superficially more “moral” than the calculation of national interest, but it leads easily to self-righteous crusading.

Miller/Molesky admit that de Gaulle was good for France. But since they equate alliance with subservience, a Gaullist France must be bad for the United States. Far from reaching obsessively for France’s ancient glory, as this book interprets him, de Gaulle was the quintessential realist. He understood lucidly the limits to France’s power, which enabled him to take the hard but correct decision for Algerian independence. Thereafter he was determined to use his limited power to the utmost to give the French a sense that their country still mattered. His complicated game of vigorous support for Washington during tension over Berlin, Cuba, and Czechoslovakia, alternating with quests for elbowroom during calmer periods, is simply incomprehensible to Miller/Molesky. So they falsify his language, perhaps unconsciously. They quote de Gaulle claiming to be the leader of “Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals,” but that famous phrase actually offered Khrushchev “détente ... from the Atlantic to the Urals.”

Miller/Molesky are vulnerable to such errors because all their French quotations except one, as far as I can determine, come secondhand from someone else’s extracts in English. This flagrant misquotation of de Gaulle came from Brian Crozier, an Australian journalist who imagined that de Gaulle was a crypto-communist. Other factual errors about France mar this book, many trivial, some not. Wagram in 1806 was not France’s last victory (the Marne?), and though many French citizens applauded

José Bové’s famous assault on a McDonald’s, Chirac’s government prosecuted him and sent him to prison. At least the authors cannot be accused of contamination by over-familiarity with the details of French life and history.

We must admit that Miller/Molesky sometimes let France off the hook. Anti-Semitism does not bother them overly; they give it half a page. They utter not a peep about the French army’s use of torture in Algeria, or about Chirac’s nuclear test in the Pacific in the face of international disapproval. Can we guess why?

The French Enlightenment, however, takes heavy fire. Its preference for theory over practice, the archetypical French vice, is accused of spawning 20th-century communism and fascism. Voltaire, astonishingly, “propped up delusions of national glory” instead of “speaking truth to power,” and Rousseau wanted “society razed to the ground before it could be built again,” an idea whose “direct outgrowth” was the violence of the French Revolution. It is surprising to see a Harvard Ph.D. in intellectual history forget that the Enlightenment flourished also in Philadelphia, Berlin, and Edinburgh (Adam Smith), and was frequently pragmatic (the first smallpox vaccinations, for example). Its principal heritage was democratic and libertarian (including the American Constitution), and only by perversion did it contribute something to modern totalitarianism.

Miller/Molesky skewer deconstruction gleefully. Ironically, as other reviewers have already observed, their manifest conviction that power consists of shaping the images by which we understand our past makes them closet disciples of Derrida and Foucault. In that spirit they have constructed a wilfully one-track image of the complex history of Franco-American relations. Readers looking for reasons to hate the French, who tolerate selective and slanted scholarship, will applaud. ■

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[*Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire*, Anne Norton, Yale University Press, 256 pages]

What Would Strauss Do?

By Michael C. Desch

AMERICANS ARE NOT intellectual people: we have just re-elected a president who prides himself on not reading the nation's leading newspapers. And yet, according to much breathless reporting and a new book by University of Pennsylvania political theorist Anne Norton, the anti-intellectual Bush administration is actually in the thrall of a cabal of intellectuals initiated into the mysteries of a conservative cult by an obscure émigré political theorist named Leo Strauss. Ironically, a nation of know-nothings is secretly guided by adherents of an esoteric political tradition rooted in a grand conversation among philosophers ranging from ancient Greece to Weimar Germany.

As the number of individuals in prominent government positions with ties to Strauss and his students has grown, interest in the impact of the late University of Chicago professor's thought has also increased. Articles have recently appeared in the *New York Review of Books*, *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *New York Times*, and many other periodicals. Books such as James Mann's *The Rise of the Vulcans* and Robert Devigne's *Recasting Conservatism* have also explored this subject. Norton's *Leo Strauss and the Politics of the American Empire* is thus part of a growing pile of paper.

Though Strauss died in 1973, concern about the influence of his disciples on American policy did not manifest itself until the Reagan administration. "Straussianism" was less evident in the first Bush and Clinton administrations, but Straussians are once again prominent under George W. Bush. The most well

known is Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, the architect of the Iraq War. But others, such as Abram Shulsky, the Director of the Pentagon's Office of Special Plans and Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, are also mentioned as conduits of Strauss's influence. Outside of government, *Weekly Standard* editor William Kristol and Project for the New American Century executive director Gary Schmitt are among the public intellectuals tied to Strauss or his students.

Norton's book is both analytical and autobiographical—she studied at the University of Chicago with Strauss's students and others who would later become prominent political Straussians. "I would never have thought of writing about [Straussians]," she begins, "but things changed. Certain of the people I had known came to power. The nation went to war. Because the nation is at war, and because the Straussians are prominent among those who govern, the accounts I had been given are no longer part of a curious personal history but elements of a common legacy."

One problem with the book is that it is based mostly on her recollections of things she heard and saw many years ago. The book, therefore, probably shares many of the evidentiary problems common to "recovered memories" and gossip. But its most significant weakness is that Norton never separates her personal experience, both positive and negative, with Straussians in graduate school from her analysis of Strauss's influence in Washington today. She remains deeply ambivalent about Strauss and never provides a clear answer the \$64,000 question: how much influence do the teachings of Strauss really exercise on the Bush administration?

I also studied at Chicago, but after Norton, and my specialty was international relations, not political theory. I did, however, take a few courses with prominent Straussians like Joseph Cropsey and Nathan Tarcov. For three years I was also a junior fellow in Allan Bloom's John M. Olin Center for the Inquiry Into the Theory and Practice of

Democracy, where I met many other academic Straussians including Leon Kass, Thomas Pangle, Clifford Orwin, Werner Dannhauser, and Ralph Lerner. Through the Olin Center, I also became acquainted with such political Straussians as Shulsky, Kristol, Alan Keyes, Frank Fukuyama, and William Galston. There is much I admire about academic Straussianism, but my intellectual and policy proclivities have taken me in a different direction.

Norton's reminiscences evoked a good deal of nostalgia for me. Her portrait of Cropsey, in particular, brought back fond memories of listening to him lecture on Plato's *Republic* with subtle wit and penetrating insight. Her account of the Straussians' distinct sense of hierarchy and their penchant for the *double entendre* also reminded me of the time Bloom called me a "hard-headed realist." Since I was by then enamored of realists like E.H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, and Kenneth Waltz, I might have taken this as an unqualified compliment. But as Bloom was a student of Friedrich Nietzsche, I knew that there was also a reminder in his remark that my practical bent may have led me to ignore more important philosophical issues.

In some places, Norton paints flattering portraits of Strauss and his academic followers—"The first students of Strauss I knew at Chicago were my professors Joseph Cropsey and Ralph Lerner. To listen to them read a text was to go into the garden, into a wilderness, into an ocean and breathe. They were scandalous, they were daring, they took your breath away with their honesty. They were precise, disciplined, ascetic, reverent, heretical, blasphemous, and fearless."

Like Mark Lilla in his two superb essays in the *New York Review of Books*, Norton distinguishes between Strauss and his academic followers and the political Straussians in Washington. The latter, in her account, are academic failures forced to settle for government jobs, who in their ignorance have tried to turn Strauss into a contemporary neo-conservative. For this she blames Bloom