

**Nihilism and the Neoconservatives:
Allan Bloom's Encounter with the American Intellectual Right**

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Introduction: The Philosopher and the Intellectual

The philosophers' teaching, even when it has a political cast, could never be implemented directly or 'immediately.' One might therefore view it as by definition inapplicable.... But 'intellectual mediators' have always taken hold of it and confronted it with contemporary reality by trying to discover or to construct a bridge between the two.... Sooner or later some tyrant always sought guidance in his day-to-day actions from the usable (oral or written) advice issuing from these 'mediators.' – Alexandre Kojève¹

Though Allan Bloom may not have had the presumption to include himself among the philosophers, he certainly would have rejected being called an “intellectual” in the sense meant by his former teacher Alexandre Kojève. Bloom preferred to follow the example of his other lifelong teacher Leo Strauss, for whom the proper “mediation” between philosophy and contemporary life took place most directly not through engagement with the politics of the present, but rather through the careful study and teaching of the greatest thinkers of the past. Yet by the end of his career, Bloom could not escape stepping out of his role as a professor of philosophy to participate in public controversy. He may have disavowed all political intentions in *The Closing of the American Mind* (hereafter *Closing*), the 1987 bestseller that made him famous, but despite his claims to neutrality, Bloom's “meditation on the state of our souls” contributed substantially to a reorientation of neoconservative political thought in the late 1980s and early '90s.² As the neoconservative intellectuals sought to complete their integration into the mainstream of the American Right, Bloom's book helped give them a fuller understanding of the bridge between their own philosophical preoccupations and the conservative politics of their time. Leaving the world of philosophy to join the neoconservatives' intellectual project, Bloom found himself at the center of a movement that was poised to earn the attention of men and women in high seats of political power.

1 Kojève's essay, “Tyranny and Wisdom,” part of an exchange with Leo Strauss, appears in Strauss's *On Tyranny*, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 173-4.

2 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 19.

The philosophical commonality between Bloom and the neoconservatives was, namely, a preoccupation with nihilism as an inherent danger of modern society. Bloom understood nihilism, following Nietzsche, as the distinctly modern loss of faith in transcendent sources of meaning, such as religion, reason, or anything else that can serve as a ground for commitments and beliefs. Drawing on the ideas of his mentor Strauss, as well as those of Nietzsche, Tocqueville, and Plato, Bloom wrote in *Closing* that nihilism was endemic to liberal democratic societies, which suffered from an inability to justify themselves based on a positive idea of the social good.³ Bloom and the early neoconservatives – chiefly among them Daniel Bell, Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, and Norman Podhoretz – agreed that nihilism, so defined, threatened democratic political life by eroding the foundations on which ordinary citizens can affirm political and economic institutions as legitimate. For all of these thinkers, the defense of modern institutions necessarily involved an awareness of their self-undermining tendencies. Unlike these writers, though, who readily accepted their roles as “intellectuals” engaged in contemporary politics, Bloom believed, at least early on, that only philosophical education could counteract the nihilism of liberal democracy by providing access to pre- and anti-modern forms of thought.⁴

The neoconservatives responded to the crisis of political legitimacy during the late 1960s by undertaking a defense of America's existing political and economic institutions. “The Sixties,”

3 I use the term “liberalism,” depending on the context, to denote three basic concepts. First, I refer to the political philosophy of the Enlightenment liberalism, and use “liberal democracy” to speak in general of the political societies founded thereon. Second, in the context of American politics during the middle of the twentieth century, I use the term liberalism to refer to the political framework established by the legacy of Franklin Roosevelt's Administrations (see footnote 10, below). Finally, I account for the tendency of neoconservatives in the late 1980s and early '90s to use “liberalism” as a vague term for the American Left. Since the various writers that I discuss in this paper are not consistent among themselves in their uses of the word, some confusion may be inevitable, but these changes and obfuscations in America's political vocabulary are a part of what I hope to explain.

4 “Modernity” here refers to the conception of politics and society inaugurated by the Enlightenment and the political revolutions of the eighteenth century. This conception is characterized by liberal political philosophy, capitalist economies, public rational discourse, and, in general, the collapse of religious or other traditional worldviews as the organizing force of social life.

as the neoconservatives understood them, revealed that the postwar liberal political framework had been inadequately equipped to ward off nihilistic threats to political and cultural authority.⁵ Many of them having been radicals in their youths, they were intimately familiar with the experience of both disillusionment from mainstream politics, and subsequent reconciliation therewith. In the wake of radical political movements, the failure of the Vietnam War, and an increased awareness of American poverty, the neoconservatives engaged themselves as public intellectuals and policy experts in the hope of reconciling the American public with its basic political framework. Though Bloom's experience of the campus politics of the late 1960s while on faculty at Cornell was similar to those of his neoconservative contemporaries, he did not immediately join their public efforts to defend the institutions of modern America. It was only in the early 1980s, in response to what he saw as the detrimental legacy of the Sixties on higher education, that Bloom began to write on current issues for a wide audience.

By these years, the neoconservative intellectuals had achieved considerable success in integrating their political priorities into the mainstream institutions of the American Right. The political coalition that supported Ronald Reagan offered them opportunities to wage their defense against nihilism within pro-market and anti-Communist think-tanks and foundations, and to make connections with officials in the Republican Party. Within this growing neoconservative network, Bloom found support for new intellectual projects, which culminated in *Closing*, a sweeping diagnosis of the nihilism and aimlessness in both the university and in American culture at large. In the last years of the 1980s, Bloom's book helped to make sense of some of the alliances between neoconservatives and other Right-wing groups. Crucially, many

⁵ I distinguish terminologically between temporal decade of the 1960s, and “the Sixties,” referring to the radical politics of that period as Bloom and the neoconservatives understood them.

neoconservative intellectuals had previously found it difficult to understand what they shared with grassroots Christian and traditionalist conservatives within the Reagan coalition. *Closing's* identification of the nihilism of the Sixties as the source of the erosion of not only political, cultural, and moral authority offered a potential basis for a principled alliance between the neoconservatives and their new conservative allies.

For the neoconservative intellectuals, Bloom's book appeared at an opportune moment. The previous bases of unity with others on the Right had significantly waned in importance as the 1980s came to a close. The Cold War was ending, and the New Left radical movements had largely faded into historical memory. Following Bloom's lead, many prominent neoconservatives began to focus their attention on new academic trends in America's universities aimed at promoting cultural pluralism in curricula and student life. Neoconservatives saw in these reforms, which they derided as "political correctness," the culmination of the nihilistic assault on established American culture that had begun in the Sixties. The debates over political correctness offered the neoconservative intellectuals an opportunity to put their project of political reconciliation into practice as the basis of a new conservative coalition. In their rhetoric during these debates, they arrived at an altered understanding of who their left-liberal enemies were that helped bring this coalition together, but also distorted their original concept of nihilism. This danger no longer appeared to them as an inherent outgrowth of modern American society to be dealt with by strengthening institutions, but rather, as the radical "postmodern" program of a small academic elite. By the middle of the 1990s, the neoconservatives had officially entered the mainstream American Right, but at the cost of obfuscating their philosophical project.

In recent scholarship, a concern with explaining the neoconservatives' influence on the

foreign policy of George W. Bush's presidency has often obscured a full understanding of Bloom's place on the intellectual Right. The worthy task of making sense of recent American wars in the Middle East has led some to search for a justification of military interventionism in the political ideas of Leo Strauss and his students. For this reason, historians of neoconservatism have mentioned Bloom, the most famous “Straussian,” most often as the mentor of several prominent Republican foreign policy officials, most notably Paul Wolfowitz, a chief architect of the 2003 Iraq invasion.⁶ Justin Vaïsse's recent history of neoconservatism, rightly in my view, distances itself from the attempt to identify a strong conceptual connection between “Straussianism” and American militarism. Vaïsse succeeds in clearly distinguishing the neoconservatives who directly influenced Bush's policy from their earlier predecessors who had much less to say about foreign affairs. He overcompensates, however, by leaving Bloom and Strauss largely out of the story. Despite my indebtedness to Vaïsse's book, the most comprehensive on neoconservatism to date, I believe that its overwhelming concern with foreign policy overlooks both Bloom's similarities with the early neoconservative intellectuals and his role in bringing about the movement's transformations in the last three decades.⁷ Bloom undeniably played a role in shaping the American conservatism of recent years, including the militarism of the Bush years, but the best way to understand how he did so is to step back from this presentist framework and examine his writings and those of his fellow neoconservatives on their own terms.⁸

6 Anne Norton's *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), is perhaps the most well-known attempt to link Strauss's ideas to the “Bush Doctrine.” Within the historical literature, a typical presentation of Bloom in his connection to Wolfowitz and others can be found in Brandon High, “The Recent Historiography of American Neoconservatism,” *The Historical Journal* 52, no. 2 (2009).

7 I am inspired in these methodological remarks by Robert Howse, whose excellent *Leo Strauss: Man of Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), gives a more robust rebuttal to the charges of imperialism against Strauss than I could hope to include in this paper.

8 Justin Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

My aim is to situate Bloom within a neoconservative project that in its origins had little to do with foreign policy at all, a project of reconstructing the foundations of political and cultural legitimacy in response to what they saw as a crisis of nihilism in twentieth century America. I concur with commentators including Peter Steinfels, Jürgen Habermas, and Gary Dorrien, who saw in this project the potential for an American conservatism that could reconcile itself with the conditions of modern life, while nonetheless remaining critical of modernity and seeking to improve on its faults.⁹ Bloom's bestseller appeared as the neoconservative intellectuals were grappling with how to allow this project to shape political reality and influence those in power. *Closing's* cultural critique offered a potential means to understand the neoconservative alliance with libertarians, foreign policy hawks, and religious traditionalists not merely as a marriage of convenience, but as part of a principled conservative movement. The “political correctness” debates that Bloom helped to start, however, revealed the fragility of the neoconservatives' principles as they succeeded in taking leadership of the American Right.

My intention here is neither to defend Bloom and the neoconservatives against the typical charges leveled against them today (e.g., support for American imperialism, inattention to cultural pluralism, intellectual “elitism”), nor to contribute to those charges. Rather, I hope to make clear the ways in which their intellectual project derived from serious philosophical origins, and had potential to contribute constructively to the American political understanding. As these intellectuals gained political influence with remarkable success, they allowed the philosophical core of their thinking, their meditation on the problem of nihilism, to lose its

⁹ Peter Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America's Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979); Jürgen Habermas, “Neoconservative Culture Criticism in the United States and West Germany: An Intellectual Movement in Two Political Cultures,” trans. Russell A. Berman, *Telos*, no. 56 (20 June, 1983): 75-89; and Gary Dorrien, *The Neoconservative Mind: Politics, Culture, and the War of Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

meaning. It is somewhat surprising that this was the fate of Allan Bloom, who had spent much of his life grappling with the disconnect between the philosopher's world of reflection and the intellectual's world of political engagement. Nonetheless, the moment of Bloom's philosophical intervention in the neoconservative project helps to reveal some of the ways in which American conservatives of recent decades have come to understand why their country and its institutions are good, where it stands in the global order, and who its enemies are.

I. Liberalism, Nihilism, and the New American Conservatism

Neoconservatism was born as a group of postwar intellectuals defected from an American liberalism that, in their view, had failed to protect itself from crisis. Many of them former radicals, the early leaders of this emerging intellectual movement had experienced strong feelings of alienation from modern political society in their youths, but later came to reconcile themselves with the postwar liberal establishment. Witnessing firsthand the radical movements of discontented youth during the Sixties, they struggled to understand the sources of Americans' disillusionment with their political and economic structures. The task they set for themselves was to lead the American public towards a similar reconciliation with these structures as they themselves had undergone personally. The result of their efforts was to articulate a novel conservative position that sought to defend the institutions of modern American society against their own internal tendency to produce nihilistic or anti-authoritarian discontent. Allan Bloom shared with the neoconservative intellectuals both a similar experience of the campus revolts, and an interpretation of how New Deal liberalism had failed to prevent them. During most of the 1970s, however, he avoided the neoconservatives' public intellectual struggles, remaining a

“fellow traveler” in relative anonymity.

Most of the intellectuals who became prominent neoconservatives in the early 1970s had begun their careers as three decades earlier on the radical Left, and only later came to reconcile themselves with the post-war “liberal consensus.”¹⁰ Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, and Norman Podhoretz had been associated in their youths with the “New York Intellectuals,” a group of anti-Stalinist radicals active primarily during the years before the Second World War. New York Intellectual journals such as *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* combined a confrontational style of leftist polemics with a flair for modernist literature, creating an intellectual space for radical dissent against the New Deal liberal establishment. By the late 1950s and early '60s, however, the writers who would soon emerge as neoconservatives had mostly come to terms with postwar liberalism. For some of them, reconciliation with the American mainstream appeared as the only responsible choice in a Cold War context where the only alternative to the American way of life was Stalinism. On the other hand, their coming to terms with the liberal establishment, particularly in Bell's case, stemmed from a newfound belief working to reform existing institutions was a more effective way to realize political justice than remaining on the radical fringe.¹¹ Though they remained willing to criticize the liberalism of the

10 By “liberal consensus,” I mean the idea of governance established by Franklin Roosevelt's administrations and continued by his successors from Truman to Johnson. This conception of the liberal state was to play an active role in promoting economic growth, while also concentrating a large degree of resources towards containing the influence of the Soviet Union in world politics. This political framework could plausibly claim to stand for the “consensus” view insofar as it united “progressive” or otherwise egalitarian political commitments with both a confidence in the power of American industry and a fear of global Communism. The literature on this subject is too vast to summarize adequately here, but my understanding is informed chiefly by Alan Brinkley, “The New Deal and the Idea of the State,” in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order: 1930-1980*, ed. S. Fraser and G. Gerstle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). See also Howard Brick, *Age of Contradiction: American Thought & Culture in the 1960s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 33-5.

11 Brick gives a detailed account of Bell's grappling with the liberal establishment in *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism: Social Theory and Political Reconciliation in the 1940s* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986).

post-New Deal era, they had become committed to its basic political framework.¹²

The environment in which Bloom came of age as a thinker bore little resemblance to the New York Intellectuals' world of radical polemics. But although Bloom never experienced a phase as a socialist or leftist, he too had learned to reconcile himself with the New Deal consensus despite having held deeply critical views of liberalism. The decisive influence on Bloom's intellectual development came at age nineteen, when he first became a student of Leo Strauss at the University of Chicago. A Jewish refugee from Hitler's Germany, Strauss had devoted a great part of his career to understanding the sources of fascism and preventing its rebirth. In his youth, he had seen the greatest minds of the time turn away from the Weimar Republic's experiment with liberal democracy, seduced, as he saw it, by a kind of politics that favored passionate commitment over reasoned debate. In response, the project of Strauss's writing and teaching was to understand the ways in which Enlightenment liberal philosophy failed to justify the legitimacy of its aims. Liberalism's shortcomings, he believed, could potentially be mitigated by recovering elements of classical Greek political thought.¹³

For Strauss, however, this recovery was not to take place primarily through political action, but rather, through liberal education. The teachings of the Greeks, in Strauss's reading, led to pedagogical solutions to philosophical problems rather than political ones.¹⁴ Strauss preferred to employ his understanding of ancient philosophy in order to moderate the political longings of his young pupils by providing an alternative perspective to that of modern liberalism. In the United States, Strauss's teaching inspired a committed group of his students to seek to continue his

12 Väisse, *Neoconservatism*, 27-37.

13 For a fuller treatment of Strauss's thought on fascism and nihilism, see Howse, *Leo Strauss*, chapter 2.

14 Strauss's classicism often led him to distrust political utopianism. Interpreting Xenophon, for example, Strauss finds a distinction between "philosophic politics," the means taken by the philosophically-educated political actor, and "that political action which the philosopher might take with a view to establishing the best regime." Strauss, "Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*," in Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 206.

scholarly and pedagogical task. Bloom, who would go on to become the most famous of this “Straussian” school, found deeply moving both his teacher's radical critique of modern liberalism and his process of reconciliation therewith. As the events of the second half of the twentieth century drew Bloom into a role as a public intellectual, he would become the primary conduit between the Straussian school and the newly formed neoconservative intellectual movement.

In Bloom's few political writings before the 1980s, his primary concern was the status of liberal education in America's universities. Until the late 1960s, he expressed a general belief in the ability of the liberal establishment to promote the kind of pedagogical activity Strauss inspired him to practice. In a 1961 speech given in France, Bloom boasted that in the postwar years, American universities had finally caught up to their European counterparts, and had begun to produce genuinely educated political leaders. Furthermore, paraphrasing the left-liberal economist John Kenneth Galbraith, he expressed a hope that careful state economic planning could serve as an alternate form of cultivation for even the uneducated general public, who “might be taught to spend more on schools and less on refrigerators.”¹⁵ For Bloom, the paternalism of the Keynesian state, had a potential to supplement the university's pedagogical role in American society. If the “liberal consensus” provided ideal conditions for American higher education, the Cold War, he wrote in 1966, was an absolute boon. The urgency to compete with the Russians resulted in a renewed valuation of academic excellence.¹⁶ Like the neoconservatives, though, Bloom was no mere apologist for either the American university or

15 Allan Bloom, “Is Europe Becoming Americanized?” speech given 14 November 1961, Allan D. Bloom papers, University of Chicago Regenstein Library, Chicago, box 1, folder 17. Here, Bloom came as close as he ever would to endorsing a critique of capitalism, acknowledging that a philosophical education was opposed to the vulgarity of consumer society. As Brick observes, Galbraith had written optimistically that in the early 1960s, as the abundance of the postwar Keynesian economy was at its peak, demand for frivolous consumer goods would inevitably reach its upper limit. Howard Brick, *Contradiction*, 5.

16 Allan Bloom, “The Crisis of Liberal Education,” in Allan Bloom, *Giants and Dwarfs: Essays 1960-1990* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 348. Cf. Bloom, *Closing*, 49.

society in general. The competitive urge of the “Sputnik moment” having faded, the university had begun to lose its sense of collective purpose. For this reason, he was initially sympathetic to the radical students of the early 1960s who spoke of a renewal of humanistic learning in response to the increasingly bureaucratic university.¹⁷

For both Bloom and the neoconservatives, the radicalization of the social movements of the Sixties signaled the collapse of the post-war liberal consensus, and it was this moment that compelled the neoconservative intellectuals to seek an alternative approach to politics. Within the New Deal liberal establishment, it had been possible to hold on to mild versions of radical aims while generally assenting to the mainstream institutions of American life. Support for the status quo did not qualify one as a conservative, as one could conceivably recognize existing institutions as progressive.¹⁸ According to Glazer, however, the student movements of the Sixties laid the foundation for a decisive schism between liberals and radicals. Initially, though their tactics were more confrontational, student groups such as the Berkeley Free Speech Movement and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) had shared many of the aims and philosophical presuppositions of mainstream New Deal liberals. As the decade went by, however, Glazer became convinced that the students had crossed a line beyond which he and his moderate allies could venture, rejecting outright liberal democracy, humanist rationalism, and the politically independent university.¹⁹ Glazer saw this new radical rhetoric, furthermore, not only in the

17 As Bloom later wrote, “the first university disruptions at Berkeley [i.e., the Berkeley Free Speech Movement] were explicitly directed against the multiversity smorgasbord and, I must confess, momentarily and partially engaged my sympathies.” Bloom, *Closing*, 338.

18 Furthermore, conservative intellectuals such as William Buckley and Russell Kirk knew quite well that they represented marginal viewpoints within the postwar liberal framework, as Buckley suggested when he characterized his magazine, the *National Review* as a lone figure that “stands athwart history, yelling Stop, at a time when no one is inclined to do so.” William Buckley, “National Review: Credenda and Statement of Principles,” in David Schneider, ed., *Conservatism in America Since 1930* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 201.

19 Nathan Glazer, “The Campus Crucible: Student Politics and the University” (1969), in Mark Gerson, ed., *The Essential Neoconservative Reader* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1996), 62. See also Nathan Glazer, “On Being Deradicalized,” *Commentary*, 1 October 1970.

student power groups, but also the anti-war and Black Power movements.²⁰ Though few of the neoconservatives were wholly hostile to the aims of these radical movements, they were vigorously opposed to, in Bell and Kristol's words, their "onrush of anger, rancor, and generational rage ... against all existing authority."²¹ In a context where a renewed discussion of poverty cast doubt on the soundness of the economic policies of the New Deal establishment, and racial violence was on the rise in many major cities, these new political trends appeared as part of a general destabilization of the prevailing liberal order. In the neoconservatives' eyes, most mainstream liberals were unprepared to deal with the new reality, and so a viable political solution would require thinking beyond the old politics of consensus.

Bloom's experience with the confrontational politics of the Sixties was a particularly disillusioning one. While on faculty at Cornell, many of his closest students became the leaders of activist groups such as SDS and the Afro-American Society (AAS). Many of these students even later reported that Bloom's teaching had been part of their inspiration to take radical political action.²² In 1969 armed members of the AAS took over the Cornell student center in the hopes of securing an administrative response to racist incidents on campus, reforms to student judicial proceedings, and the establishment of a Black Studies department. During those few days, Downs describes a campus in a state of panic. Students, faculty, and administrators alike

20 Nathan Glazer, "The New Left and its Limits," *Commentary*, 1 July 1968. Later neoconservative writings in the 1970s would often include second-wave feminism in such characterizations as well.

21 "Introduction," in Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol, eds., *Confrontation: The Student Rebellion and the Universities* (New York: Basic Books, 1968, xi. It became common in neoconservative writings in the late 1960s to characterize the movements of the New Left as having a fetish for violence. Though it is undeniable that certain groups romanticized the militarism of Third-World revolutionaries, the neoconservatives often overlooked contemporary radical movements that were explicitly pacifist or non-violent. As Brick insists, a major feature of the New Left was its repudiation of the Old Left's sympathy for Stalinist militarism. Brick, *Contradiction*, 150-9.

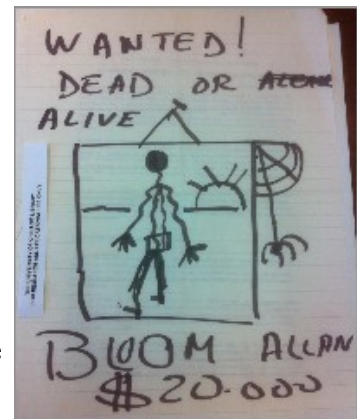
22 Donald Alexander Downs, *Cornell '69: Liberalism and the Crisis of the American University* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 28. Downs also notes that the students of Walter Berns, another Straussian professor, reported similar sentiments. My discussion of Bloom's experiences at Cornell, where not drawn from his own writings, relies on Downs's book, which takes these events as a case study of the collapse of the liberal consensus.

feared violent confrontations between armed black students, angry white fraternity members, and local police. Since Bloom had been one of the faculty leaders of the “counterrevolt” against the student-led proposals, he was among those whose lives were publicly threatened by radical members of AAS and SDS, including students whom he had known personally. Like many of his fellow Straussians and colleagues in the Government Department, Bloom initially expressed a strong urge to fight for what he saw as basic principles of academic freedom and scholarly standards. After the threats of violence, though, and in his eyes, the university's coalescence to student intimidation, he resigned, emotionally distraught, and spent nearly ten years in “exile” at the University of Toronto.²³

As Bloom wrote of these events in a relatively obscure article, the new tactics of the student activists amounted to little more than mob violence. Gone was the commitment to authentic education that he had seen in the early pamphlets of SDS. Instead, Bloom concluded, student radicals had taken an anti-intellectual turn, sacrificing the independent status of the university for the sake of what he called a “totalitarian egalitarianism.”

Movements that had once shared the goals of mainstream progressive liberalism had become intoxicated with rebelliousness and a lust for violent action, resulting in “a strange mixture of nihilism with respect to the past and present and a naïve faith in a future of democratic progress.”²⁴ Whatever faith he

had previously held that either mainstream liberalism or the student movements could protect



A flyer drawn by Cornell students in 1969 to protest Bloom's opposition to recent student activism (Allan D. Bloom Papers, University of Chicago Regenstein Library)

²³ Downs, *Cornell '69*, 215, 218, 271-2.

²⁴ Allan Bloom, “The Democratization of the University,” in Bloom, *Giants and Dwarfs*, 366-87. Although no major publication associated with neoconservatism published any of Bloom's writing until after *Closing* had made him a celebrity, Irving Kristol wrote to Bloom expressing his regret that he had not been able to include this essay in the latest issue of *The Public Interest*. He nonetheless assured Bloom that he would circulate it among colleagues, “for the sake of their souls.” Irving Kristol to Allan Bloom, 10 November 1969, Allan D. Bloom papers, box 6.

American liberal democracy against the threat of nihilism soon disappeared.

In their responses to the collapse of the postwar liberal consensus, the neoconservatives articulated a novel conservative position in American intellectual history beginning in the early 1970s. This was a conservatism that aimed to defend the institutions of American modernity by seeking to understand and respond to the ways in which liberal democracy and capitalism tend to produce philosophical nihilism and political instability. The neoconservative intellectuals were of two general persuasions, one led by social scientists such as Daniel Bell, and the other by culture critics such as Irving Kristol. The sociological neoconservatives – including Bell, Glazer, and Peter Berger – sought to understand the collapse of political, cultural, and spiritual authority as a structural failure of modern society, and to articulate new ways of making such authority palatable. A guiding text in this effort was Bell's *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. For Bell, the crisis of the Sixties was a consequence of modernity's disruption of traditional forms of authority and connection to the past.²⁵ In the twentieth century, this disruption could be seen most clearly in capitalism's undermining of the “Protestant work ethic” which had initially served as its moral justification. The development of a system of mass consumption favored the indulgence of the self over delayed gratification or submission to traditional authority. In the Sixties, then, movements of radical anti-authoritarianism and cultural hedonism were expressions of implicit tendencies in modernity itself. For Bell, the new ethos of liberation made the pursuit of common political goals – which requires submission to legitimate authority – virtually impossible.²⁶

The primary interventions of these sociological neoconservatives in public discourse were

²⁵ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 4.

²⁶ Bell, *Contradictions*, 118-9, 144.

their often highly technical policy recommendations. The intellectual project of *The Public Interest*, the journal founded by Bell and Kristol in 1965, was to employ social science expertise towards identifying and correcting the shortcomings of the social policies of the Johnson Administration. The Great Society social programs, wrote Bell, Glazer, S.M. Lipset, and other sociologists in the journal's pages, had created unfulfillable expectations for the federal government and come up against what Glazer called "the limits of social policy."²⁷ For Bell, the source of the problem was that in the combative atmosphere of post-Sixties politics, the political sphere had become an arena of cultural conflict. Various cultural groups saw their political role as achieving the state's recognition of their worldview at the expense of those of others. As a response, Bell sought to determine ways to exclude cultural concerns altogether from the political sphere. The proper concern of politics, as he saw it, was the pursuit of truly public needs that transcended group interest, such as the just distribution of material goods.²⁸ In a similar spirit, Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus argued that public policy should promote the cultural autonomy of "mediating structures," institutions such as churches, neighborhoods, and labor unions, rather than subject questions of moral and symbolic significance to the democratic process.²⁹ The neoconservatism of these writers was conservative to the extent that it insisted on the limits of popular democracy and political efforts to make the real fully rational. Its solutions to the current crisis of authority tended to favor a greater role for technical expertise and political leadership, and a smaller role for mass popular movements and cultural conflict.

For the other wing of the emerging neoconservative movement, in contrast, cultural conflict

27 Nathan Glazer, "The Limits of Social Policy." *Commentary*, 1 September 1971.

28 See Bell's essay, "'The Public Household: On 'Fiscal Sociology' and the Liberal Society,'" in Bell, *Contradictions*, 220-82, especially 220-2.

29 Richard John Neuhaus and Peter Berger, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Policy*, excerpt appears in Gerson, *Neoconservative Reader*, 213-235.

was essential to their defense of modern American institutions. Editorialists and culture critics such as Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz saw their primary task as combatting the “adversary culture” of radical New Left intellectuals. Following Lionel Trilling, they understood this phrase as denoting the worldview of early twentieth century modernist artists and intellectuals: radically individualist, anti-authoritarian, hedonistic, and politically subversive. Modernist intellectuals in their own right, Kristol and Podhoretz did not see the “adversary culture” as dangerous in itself. The trouble was, as they saw it, that in postwar America, there existed for the first time in history a mass-educated public capable of emulating this radical cultural outlook. Radical intellectuals now held an unprecedented influence over an increasingly educated and professionalized society. While the “adversary culture” was harmless when confined to a marginal artistic and intellectual elite, its generalization led to the social and political crisis of the Sixties, in which Americans *en masse* sought freedom from authority and gratification of impulses.³⁰

The neoconservatives polemicists' response to this new cultural situation was to declare war against the radical intellectuals for hegemony over the opinion of educated Americans. They saw themselves, in this sense, as “counter-intellectuals.” Nowhere was this more the case than at *Commentary* magazine under Podhoretz's editorship, which Steinfels describes as having embarked on a “scorched-earth campaign against the New Left and the counterculture.”³¹ Podhoretz's tactic was to wrest from New Left intellectuals – primarily those who wrote for the newly founded *New York Review of Books* – any and all claims to define America's cultural

30 Irving Kristol, “The Adversary Culture of Intellectuals” (1979), in Irving Kristol, *Reflections of a Neoconservative: Looking Back, Looking Ahead* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 27-42. Podhoretz expressed nearly the same view in “The Adversary Culture and the New Class,” in B. Bruce-Briggs, ed., *The New Class?* (Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1979), 19-31.

31 Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives*, 21.

vocabulary. Kristol's approach was less confrontational, though no less ambitious, for he aimed to articulate a renewed defense of traditional bourgeois morality and culture.³² By the late 1970s Kristol and others attempted to bring these ideas into direct communication with leaders of the business community and the political world. The result of these neoconservative polemics was to begin a war of ideas in response to the upheavals of the Sixties. This war, however, at least for the moment, remained largely confined to intellectual, economic, and political elites, and “neoconservatism” would not become a familiar term in public discourse for quite some time.

As commentators such as Steinfels, Dorrien, and Habermas have observed, the combination of both social-scientific and polemical neoconservatism represented a powerful reformulation of American political conservatism that could coherently affirm its commitment to modernity. American conservatism had found itself faced with the dilemma of having to choose between support for the free market and other modern institutions, and their reverence for the traditional and religious values that modernization has threatened.³³ Neoconservatism's conception of nihilism, in contrast, enabled it to reconcile conservative principles with an acceptance and defense of the modern American political and social framework. For Steinfels, paraphrasing traditionalist conservative Peter Viereck, the accomplishment of the neoconservatives was to have found in modern rationalism a “living tradition” worth defending. Emphasizing the conservative aspects of the liberal tradition, they articulated a defense of the status quo in the face of the radical challenges of the Sixties. At the same time, however, the

32 A prime example is his essay “Horatio Alger and Profits,” *Wall Street Journal*, 11 July 1974, in which he sought to remind his readers of 19th century traditions in which commercial activity was seen as a form of self-betterment. There was perhaps something disingenuous or ironic in this defense of bourgeois shopkeeper morality coming from an urbane intellectual such as Kristol. Kristol believed, however, that this was the cultural outlook to which most Americans actually ascribed. His task, then, was to chastise his fellow intellectuals for losing sight of this fact.

33 As George Nash documents, despite the prominence of William Buckley's *National Review*, a journal that sought to “fuse” traditionalism and libertarianism, 1950s traditionalists in particular were hardly satisfied with attempts to make these two worldviews fit together. George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 144-8.

neoconservatives were nothing if not critics of modern Enlightenment liberalism. Their experiences of disillusionment, whether with the promise of socialism or with the progress of New Deal liberalism, left them with a shaken faith in rationality and progress, and a willingness to construct novel political alternatives.³⁴ Their conservative project consisted of a defense of liberal democracy and capitalism with the aim of reforming their tendencies to undermine traditional authority, re-establishing political stability and the possibility of religious faith within a modern framework.³⁵

This new conservatism, however, contained several internal tensions between its two major branches that would become increasingly apparent in subsequent decades. The first was one of style, for although much of the theoretical foundation of neoconservatism pointed towards a politics of moderation and realism, the movement often relied on polemical and rhetorical warfare. As Dorrien remarks, this was more than a mere difference of political sensibility, for while Bell's social-scientific brand of neoconservatism recommended a de-escalation of cultural conflict, culture critics such as Kristol and Podhoretz insisted on asserting a conservative cultural vision against that of the radicals.³⁶ These tensions became ever more significant later on as neoconservatives sought to form alliances with other factions of the conservative Right. It remained to be seen whether neoconservatism's primary function would consist in providing philosophically informed policy advising, or in waging war against the "adversary culture."

Despite similarities between Bloom's experience and interpretation of the Sixties with those

34 Habermas notes that in contrast to contemporary European conservatives, who relied on long traditions of like-minded thought in their own countries, neoconservatives relied primarily on new theoretical work. Habermas, "Neoconservative Culture Criticism," 82.

35 Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives*, 15-9, 26-9, 180-7. Though most of the neoconservatives discussed in this paper were atheists from Jewish backgrounds, several prominent neoconservatives – primarily Berger, Richard John Neuhaus, and Michael Novak – did indeed hold deep religious commitments which informed their writings.

36 Dorrien, *The Neoconservative Mind*, 307.

of his neoconservative contemporaries, he did not engage himself in either their theoretical or polemical efforts over the course of the 1970s. Only in the following decade would he begin to collaborate with neoconservative organizations and publications. As *Closing* burst into public intellectual discourse in the late '80s, Bloom's work made explicit the affinities between the Straussian and neoconservative conceptions of nihilism, and in the debates that followed, the tensions within the neoconservative discourse found their full expression.

II. The Making of a Movement and *The Closing of the American Mind*

By the late 1970s, the neoconservative intellectuals had begun serious efforts to earn the attention of leaders in the worlds of business and politics. For many of them, led by Irving Kristol, gaining influence in these sectors was a necessary measure in order to successfully mitigate the damage done during the nihilistic crisis of the Sixties. As a result, the neoconservatives became a part of the emerging coalition behind Ronald Reagan's 1980 candidacy for President. Neoconservatives often found themselves in substantial disagreement with their new allies, but in the context of an escalating Cold War, these tensions proved to be manageable for them. It was in this context that Bloom began to emerge as a public intellectual, in response to what he perceived as dangers to the philosophical independence of the university in American democratic society. Reaching out to neoconservative organizations such as the American Enterprise Institute and the Olin Foundation, he found generous support for various projects that led him to write *The Closing of the American Mind*. Bloom's book helped to expand the philosophical basis of the neoconservative project of political reconciliation. Adapting the ideas of Leo Strauss to contemporary politics, Bloom attempted to explain a deep cultural crisis

in American society as the result of the nihilistic turn in modern political philosophy. Bloom's contribution to the neoconservatives' philosophical understanding of nihilism helped to better equip them to engage in the cultural politics of the contemporary conservative Right.

In the 1970s, the neoconservative intellectuals found new allies in government as a growing number of political officials began to react to the politics of the previous decade with alarm. As Vaïsse observes, a new faction of moderate liberals emerged who feared that the Democratic Party was abandoning the politics the New Deal in favor of Sixties radicalism. On domestic issues, the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, formed in 1972, sought to resist the influence of New Left movements over their party's direction. Their concern was that movements such as second-wave feminism and Black Power were leading the Democrats to pander to the particular interests of disparate oppressed groups. These Democrats, opposed to the “new politics” of the George McGovern years, found much to like in Kristol and Podhoretz's polemics against the rebellious political style of the Sixties. In foreign policy, Senator Henry M. Jackson and his supporters – which included Bloom's student Paul Wolfowitz – became vocal in favor of a tough line on Soviet Communism in contrast to the reconciliatory policies of the Nixon and Carter Administrations. In their view, both parties, but particularly the Democrats, had lost their former commitment to containing the Soviet Union's geopolitical advances. At first, few of these politicians or policy advisors considered themselves conservative. Rather, they saw their task as defending the old liberal political establishment against both co-optation by New Left movements and complacency in the struggle against Communism.³⁷

³⁷ Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 81-100, 180. Vaïsse refers to the politicians within the Democratic Party who moved towards the Reagan camp in the 1970s as “second age” neoconservatives. This approach has the advantage of acknowledging that this political movement is a part of what we today call neoconservatism, while also keeping it separate from the intellectual movement surrounding *The Public Interest* and *Commentary* beginning in the late

As the neoconservatives found common ground with these disaffected Democrats in the aftermath of the Sixties, they began to find that their aim to restore something resembling the old liberal consensus drew them towards the political Right. Within think-tanks and political foundations such as the anti-Soviet Committee on Present Danger, or the pro-market American Enterprise Institute (AEI), the neoconservatives began to make personal and professional connections with conservative politicians of the Republican Party for the first time. Ronald Reagan's campaign for the 1980 presidential election offered a political platform that united Cold War hawks, defenders of the free market, and opponents of the New Left as part of a common conservative coalition. Though not all of the Democrats who had been disillusioned by their party's post-Sixties turn joined the Reagan camp, many of them, particularly the Jackson Democrats in foreign policy, went on to become central members of Republican administrations over the coming decades.³⁸

The neoconservative intellectuals were not entirely comfortable with their new alliance with the Republican Right, but faced with the threats of the New Left and increased tension with the Soviet Union, they made an effort to resolve their major disagreements. For example, the neoconservatives' allies in foreign policy administrations tended not to share their concern with nihilism or authority. For them, America's main problem consisted in its unwillingness to stand firm against America's enemies abroad. Though nearly all the neoconservative intellectuals remained staunchly anti-Communist, they focused their attention to a far greater extent on

1960s and early '70s. For the purposes of simplicity, I restrict my usage of the term "neoconservatism" in this paper to speak of the intellectual movement. Although this may be counterintuitive given the way we understand neoconservatism as a whole today, it is consistent with the way the word was actually used in the contemporary context. As Vaïsse himself makes a point to observe, the word was the coinage of socialist intellectuals during the 1970s, and was not widely known outside the readership of small intellectual magazines until the 1990s.

38 Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 203-7.

domestic matters of political legitimacy and cultural authority.³⁹ Even more pronounced was the tension between neoconservatism and the *laissez-faire* libertarianism prevailing among business leaders within groups such as the AEI. Intellectuals such Irving Kristol, Peter Berger, and Michael Novak became resident scholars at the AEI largely in order to correct what they saw as an inadequate defense of capitalism on the American Right. In Kristol's view, the libertarianism championed by Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman reflected modern economics's narrow concern for efficiency. As a result, he claimed, defenders of capitalism were utterly unable to offer an account of how it promotes human happiness, and therefore had no answer to the Left's romantic nihilism.⁴⁰ As Dorrien observes, the intellectuals' attempts to provide an alternative defense of the market did not always go over well with their new allies, as was the case when the AEI Press found it necessary to edit out of Berger's writings the sections that highlighted most directly the failures of capitalism to establish its moral authority.⁴¹ Nonetheless, for the neoconservatives, engaging directly with the leaders of the business and political worlds was an opportunity to instruct them in their account of the nihilistic challenges to the legitimacy of modern institutions.

When Bloom began writing as a public intellectual after leaving Toronto for the University of Chicago in 1979, the neoconservatives had already made significant gains in putting their intellectual project into action. During the early 1970s, he had stayed largely out of public discourse, but in the early 1980s, he sought out opportunities in the growing neoconservative network to speak out against what he had come to see as urgent threats to contemporary

39 Irving Kristol went as far as to argue in 1973 that “the enemy of liberal capitalism is not so much socialism as nihilism.” Irving Kristol, “Capitalism, Socialism, and Nihilism,” in Kristol, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of a Movement* (New York: Simon and Schuster), 101.

40 Kristol, “Capitalism, Socialism and Nihilism,” 93-5, 100-1.

41 Dorrien, *The Neoconservative Mind*, 311.

American education and culture.⁴² He may have been familiar with the reports of various contemporary neoconservative officials about a nationwide decline in humanities enrollments, but as he put it in a controversial 1982 article, it was his observations of his own students and colleagues that compelled him to speak out.⁴³ In “Our Listless Universities,” Bloom wrote of a malaise prevailing in contemporary American higher education. As he saw it, students had lost their ability to believe in or care about what they were taught, and professors had no means at their disposal to inspire them. Though Bloom wrote that this devaluation of ideas had deep roots in American society and Western thought, he claimed that its immediate cause was none other than “the routinization of the passions of the Sixties.”⁴⁴ According to Bloom, the student radicals of those years had failed in their aim of destroying the university, but their nihilistic impulses had become institutionalized in the university itself. This banal version of what was once a passionate anti-authoritarian politics, he concluded, made liberal education in the 1980s all but impossible.

For Bloom, the decline of philosophical education threatened the very foundations of American liberal democracy, and as he began to search for opportunities to combat these new trends, he found allies within the growing neoconservative political movement. Neoconservative-dominated foundations proved willing to provide financial assistance for his various projects.

The American Enterprise Institute, for example funded his ten-year project of compiling a variety

42 It is perhaps more accurate to specify that Bloom distanced himself from public intellectual activity only in his own country. In the late 1970s he became involved in France with *Commentaire*, a journal founded by Raymond Aron and his students. These French intellectuals, whom Bloom had known personally for many years, translated many of his earlier essays into French for the journal's early issue. Bloom remained on *Commentaire's* masthead – a position he shared with Bell, Kristol, and Podhoretz – until his death in 1992.

43 The most prominent of these was William Bennett's *To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education* (Washington: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1984), which will be discussed further below.

44 Allan Bloom, “Our Listless Universities: An American Brand of Nihilism has Infected our Universities,” *National Review*, 10 December 1982. In earlier years, Bloom would have had little reason to write for this publication dedicated to the “fusion” of traditionalist conservatism with free-market libertarianism. But in the 1980s, the magazine's editor William Buckley actively sought to reach out to neoconservatives, intrigued by their claims to provide an alternative defense of America's institutions to those prevailing on the Right.

of Straussian writings on contemporary threats to the principles of America's founding documents.⁴⁵ In the same spirit, Bloom wrote in 1983 to Michael Joyce, director of the Olin Foundation, proposing a new institution at the University of Chicago focusing on the study of American politics. For Bloom, only a philosophically rigorous liberal education could provide young Americans with an “awareness of the intellectual foundations of free institutions.” The university today, however, required a concerted effort to resist the nihilism that either drove the young to reject America's “free institutions,” or to ignore them in apathy. Bloom suggested his former student Paul Wolfowitz as an example of the kind of statesmen that the new Olin Center would seek to produce.⁴⁶ The foundation not only agreed to establish the “John M. Olin Center for Inquiry into the Theory and Practice of Democracy” at Chicago in early 1984, but also provided funds for Bloom's expenses as he began to write *Closing* immediately afterwards.

After the controversial reception of Bloom's 1982 article, Bloom began expanding its arguments into a book, following the urgings of friends and colleagues such as the novelist Saul Bellow. That book, published in 1987 as *The Closing of the American Mind*, had the overall project of interpreting recent American politics and culture following Leo Strauss's critique of the nihilism implicit in Enlightenment liberalism. In Strauss's account, Hobbes, and Locke, the first modern liberal theorists, had broken with classical thought by severing political philosophy from the Socratic search for a social order that promotes *the* good life. The founding principle of modern politics was the protection of individuals' lives, their property, and most importantly,

45 Allan Bloom and Steven J. Kautz, eds., *Confronting the Constitution: the Challenge to Locke, Montesquieu, Jefferson, and the Federalists from Utilitarianism, Historicism, Marxism, Freudianism, Pragmatism, Existentialism...* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute Press, 1990). The book's comically expansive title highlights Bloom's sense of the pervasiveness of the threats to liberal democracy.

46 Allan Bloom to Michael Joyce, 3 June 1983, Allan D. Bloom papers, box 9.

their right to pursue whatever good they choose. This principle, for Strauss, was inherently relativistic, meaning that it accorded all claims to know what is good equal validity. This early liberalism did not amount in principle to a rejection of the idea of philosophical truth itself, but rather, merely a removal of prescriptive notions of virtue from political institutions. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, it became clear that such a conception of politics was incompatible with the notion of absolute truth, and thus the relativism of modern philosophy finally gave way to nihilism. Nietzsche's philosophy embodied the insight that all appeals to transcendent authority – such as God, nature, or even reason – had lost their meaning.⁴⁷

Though Bloom barely referenced Strauss at all in *Closing*, the book's introduction made it clear that his project was to interpret American political history, and particularly the events of the last two decades, in line with Strauss's narrative of the history of Western philosophy.⁴⁸

Americans, as Bloom suggests in *Closing's* first few pages, seemed to have held on to an idea of absolute truth far longer than their European contemporaries. What Bloom had primarily in mind was the continued authority of America's founding documents, whose conception of political freedom, rights, and obligations was rooted in a doctrine of natural or divine laws. For Bloom, Americans' "powerful attachment to the letter and spirit of the Declaration of Independence," allowed them to maintain a commitment to the idea that certain ideas are absolutely and universally valid while other countries descended into nihilism.⁴⁹ According to Bloom, a belief in

47 My summary of Strauss's history of modern political philosophy is taken from, "The Three Waves of Modernity," in Strauss, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 81-98, as well as Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1953).

48 Though Strauss had held strong views on American intellectual history, his published work dealt nearly exclusively with European philosophers. As the political scientist Robert Devigne observes, it was Bloom's book that first explicitly described Strauss's concept of nihilism in terms of the history and culture of the United States. Robert Devigne, *Recasting Conservatism: Oakeshott, Strauss, and the Response to Postmodernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 55.

49 Bloom, *Closing*, 29.

some notion of absolute truth was perfectly natural to most Americans, with or without a philosophical education, at least until recently. He placed the beginning of America's decline into nihilism in the late 1940s, when a wave of German professors, exiled from Nazi-controlled Europe, popularized theories of “value relativism” in American universities. As this relativism, which according to Bloom derived from Nietzsche's philosophy, gained influence within the nation's political conscience, the reverence with which ordinary Americans regarded their country's founding soon began to erode.⁵⁰

In Bloom's account, however, American nihilism did not reach its full destructive force until the uprisings of the Sixties. The militant actions of radical student groups at American universities, in his view, completed the disintegration of Americans' capacity to establish firm foundations for their beliefs. The student protesters of 1969, Bloom believed, had been educated on the postwar relativism that Strauss called “liberalism without natural rights,” and as a result they failed to take seriously “absolute” notions such as those found in the Declaration of Independence or the Bible. It was this relativistic upbringing that, for Bloom, subsequently led them to attack the university. In his view, this institution was the only one in American society whose guiding mission was the rational pursuit of the truth. When student protesters, then, abandoned their commitments to the university's mission, they effectively declared that truth as such was impossible, and that passionate commitment was the only substitute.⁵¹ In perhaps the

50 Bloom, *Closing*, 29, 195. Though Bloom's observations about the status of the idea of “absolute truth” in American society were certainly valid ones, his intellectual history was severely misinformed. Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen's recent *American Nietzsche: The History of an Icon and His Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), for example, goes to great lengths to show how the concerns that motivated Nietzsche and other “antifoundationalist” thinkers had roots in early American thought and history. Nonetheless, both she and Howard Brick note that both Nietzsche's work and later existentialist philosophy partially inspired by it saw a surge of popularity in the 1960s. See Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche*, 230-60; Brick, *Contradiction*, 14.

51 Bloom, *Closing*, 311. Echoing Strauss, though not having himself experienced the atmosphere of German fascism, Bloom took this attack on the university's devotion to truth to have been the essence of Nazism. This reductive view derives from Bloom's exclusive focus on the university as the symbol of the character of a political regime. For Bloom, it was Heidegger's 1933 speech as rector at the University of Freiburg, in which he urged

most blatantly provocative passage of the book, Bloom declared that the emergence of the radical movements of the Sixties in the United States was the equivalent of the rise of fascism in Weimar Germany, which had been characterized by a similar rejection of the idea of truth.⁵²

Though Bloom's historical narrative ultimately derived from Strauss's, he was no mere parrot of his teacher. Most crucially, whereas Strauss's definition of nihilism was primarily a philosophical position with implications for the stability of political regimes, Bloom was concerned to a much greater extent with its cultural and psychological manifestations. He was in this sense, as Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen has described him, a culture critic in the tradition inspired by Nietzsche himself, a designation that could not have applied to Strauss.⁵³ For Bloom, Nietzsche was both the master diagnostician of the cultural pitfalls of modern life, and the nihilist whose work served to popularize an aversion to the idea of philosophical truth. In Bloom's account, the age of American nihilism was an age of apathy and aimlessness. The typical young person, as he would have it, had lost an awareness of the value of the great books, become entranced by commercial rock music, and developed an inability to experience profound emotion or meaningful connections to others. "Above all," he wrote, "there are none of the longings ... that used to make bourgeois society ... repugnant to the young. The impossible dreams of the sixties proved to be quite possible within the loosened fabric of American life."⁵⁴

Nietzsche had written, in a passage that Bloom referenced, that despite its destructiveness, the nihilistic impulse against absolute truth had produced "a magnificent tension of the spirit the like

students to join him in supporting Adolf Hitler, that encapsulated the meaning of the Nazi movement as a whole. Such an explanation does not excuse Bloom from his overly superficial reading of both Heidegger and fascism that seems to merely equate both with nihilism and mob opinion.

⁵² Bloom, *Closing*, 313-35. Downs's book on the events at Cornell reports that similar rhetoric was widespread among opponents of the student radicals. For example, Downs quotes a professor who compared SDS to the Nuremberg rallies, and reproduces a photograph of a student wielding a sign that read, "Nazis 1939, SDS 1969." Downs, *Cornell '69*, 208.

⁵³ Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche*, 271-4, 308-11.

⁵⁴ Bloom, *Closing*, 83.

of which had never yet existed on earth: with so tense a bow we can now shoot for the most distant goals.”⁵⁵ In Bloom's view, at his most Nietzschean, equally dangerous as nihilism's effects in philosophy and politics was the psychic decay of living in a society where it has become banal. Americans had become too comfortable with radical impulses, retaining them while losing sight of the spiritual tension they ought to engender.

The tendency towards nihilism, for Bloom, was an inherent danger of liberal democratic society, and the role of the university was to counteract it by promoting alternate ways of thinking. Bloom essentially sought to combine Nietzsche's conception of nihilism with Alexis de Tocqueville's critique of the tendency of “democratic man” to reject intellectual excellence in favor of a leveling egalitarianism. The nihilistic movements of the Sixties, then, represented in Bloom's view a radicalization of the natural tendencies of liberal democracy: by their actions, he wrote, “the university was incorporated much more firmly into the system of democratic opinion, and the condition of cavelike darkness amidst prosperity feared by Tocqueville was brought painfully near.”⁵⁶ In order to avoid devolving into the psychic state of nihilism, Bloom believed, a democratic society requires institutions that can preserve the public's acceptance of intellectual and philosophical authority. For Bloom, the only institution capable of such a task was the university. He insisted that the presence of a university as autonomous from the demands of democratic politics, in which pre- and anti-modern modes of thought could be seriously investigated and taught to the young, was not only essential to the healthy flourishing of the political order, but the primary measure of a society's well-being. Bloom's complaint was not only that the Sixties had promoted an easygoing nihilism, but also that it removed the barrier

55 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, in Nietzsche, *Basic Writings*, ed., trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), 193. Cf. Bloom, *Closing*, 51.

56 Bloom, *Closing*, 319.

between democratic politics and the university. He dismissed America's college professors, at least the non-Straussian ones, as having nothing to offer their students except a regurgitation of the relativism and egalitarianism that were instinctive for those living in a democratic regime. Bloom concluded that having lost its unifying commitment to philosophical inquiry, the American university was no longer capable of providing an education that could help students both recognize the shortcomings of liberal democracy, and come to accept it nonetheless.⁵⁷

Closing helped to reveal the potential for the philosophical outlook of the Straussian school to supplement the neoconservative defense of liberal democratic institutions. Bloom's narrative of liberal political philosophy's decline into relativism and nihilism helped to situate the neoconservatives' structural analysis of the collapse of political authority within a broader history of Western thought.⁵⁸ In other words, Bloom made explicit the connection between the neoconservatives' diagnosis of the failures of twentieth century American liberalism in particular, and the inherent shortcomings of modern liberalism in general. Like Kristol and Bell, he believed that one's understanding of these shortcomings ought to lead one not to attack liberalism and modernity, but rather, to defend them from a more sophisticated position. In his collaborations with the AEI and the Olin Foundation, Bloom sought to do for the American university what Kristol aimed to do for American business institutions, arming it in an ideological struggle against radicalism over the future of liberal democracy. Bloom's solution, moreover, the

⁵⁷ Historians of American higher education have shown that colleges and universities had begun to move away from the model of liberal education that Bloom supported over a century before the uprisings at Cornell, Columbia, and Berkeley. Laurence Veysey's *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965) places the beginning of the move away from the traditional college model as early as the 1860s, when universities were reorganized to favor scientific and commercial utility over general undergraduate education. Julie A. Reuben's more recent *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) concurs with Veysey that American institutions had begun to abandon their concern with student moral edification already in the 19th century. She partially agrees with Bloom, however, in pointing out that the influence of John Dewey, who posited the solution of social problems as a major goal of the university, came into tension with the older model of liberal education.

⁵⁸ For a similar interpretation, see Devigne, *Recasting*, 65.

education of judicious statesmen who could restrain popular nihilistic sentiments, echoed Bell's argument America's political leaders must also serve as moral authorities.⁵⁹ For both Bloom and these neoconservatives, the regeneration of stability and legitimacy depended on an expanded role for responsible intellectual and philosophical elites to influence public life.

As Bloom joined the neoconservatives' intellectual project, they occupied an increasingly ambiguous position on the American political spectrum. Despite their increasing frustration with contemporary liberalism and their drift towards the Right, they still thought of themselves as defenders of the liberal philosophical conception of society. Though the neoconservatives were remarkably successful in earning the attention of Republican politicians and business leaders, not all neoconservatives were comfortable with their newfound allies. In contrast, as Bloom put forward his own critique of the recent failings of American liberalism, he made these new alliances seem unproblematic. Bloom appeared to have no qualms about the Reagan Administration's triumphant anti-Communism.⁶⁰ Bloom's private convictions on the subject may very well have been shaped by his regular correspondence with Paul Wolfowitz, in which the latter regularly filled him in on the latest in Washington.⁶¹ Similarly, though at times critical of MBA programs and the culture of American business, Bloom expressed a clear belief that capitalism was not to blame for America's cultural and political woes.⁶² Over the coming years, Bloom would play an increasingly prominent role in shaping the neoconservative movement's directions, his cultural critique informing their eventual decisive break from liberalism and their

59 Bell, *Contradictions*, 220-3.

60 Bloom ended his book, for example, with the triumphant declaration that "this is the American moment in world history, the one for which we shall be forever judged. Just as in politics the responsibility for the fate of freedom in the world has devolved upon our regime, so the fate of philosophy in the world has devolved upon our universities, and the two are related as they never have been before." Bloom, *Closing*, 382.

61 These conversations were well known to Bloom's close friends, and Saul Bellow fictionalizes them in his novel devoted to Bloom in the last years of his life, *Ravelstein* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 11-2.

62 Bloom, *Closing*, 369.

embrace of the conservative Right.

III. Reagan's Intellectuals and Bloom's Culture Wars

Bloom's cultural critique became a national bestseller at a decisive moment for the neoconservative intellectual project. The alliances they had built in the business and foreign policy worlds had brought them into the center of the conservative coalition that came to power under Ronald Reagan's leadership. The critical debates over *Closing* illustrated the shifts in America's political vocabulary that took place as intellectuals on both Right and Left sought to make sense of post-Sixties political alignments. Bloom's left-liberal critics, though not typically radicals themselves, had come to see the radical political movements of the last two decades as consistent with America's long-standing progressive traditions. In response, neoconservatives became increasingly comfortable declaring themselves as Right-wing opponents of "liberalism." Yet despite the opportunities that the Reagan coalition presented them, many neoconservatives remained uneasy with the prospect of associating themselves with the conservative Right. The greatest difficulty they foresaw was how to find common ground with the traditionalist and religious conservative groups of the New Right. Though Bloom himself expressed little affinity for the traditionalism, the conception of nihilism in his cultural critique offered a potential bridge between the anti-modern "culture wars" of New Right activists and the neoconservative intellectuals' defense of modern institutions. As the neoconservatives continued their integration into the growing conservative establishment in the years to come, it remained to be seen whether they could realize this potential for a principled unity with their new allies.

Closing's bestseller status and its author's frequent appearances in the popular media made the book a natural subject of critical debate. For many prominent left-liberal intellectuals, Bloom's sensationalist account of the Sixties especially deserved rebuke, not so much because they themselves held particular attachments to the radical movements of those years, but because of what Bloom's critique implied about the progressive egalitarianism in American liberal thought. The renowned liberal philosopher Richard Rorty formulated his objection to Bloom based on the principle that “we shall never have anything firmer to fall back on than our accumulated experience of the advantages and disadvantages of various concrete alternatives.”⁶³ Whereas Bloom held philosophy to a timeless standard that is utterly removed from changing political contexts, Rorty insisted that the philosopher has no other option than to take such contexts as his or her starting point. Rorty suggested that for American liberals, since the days of John Dewey, this starting point has been the political task of constructing institutions that treat all individuals fairly and provide equal opportunity for self-development. Though he agreed that the radical politics of the Sixties often reached unappealing excesses, he rejected Bloom's conclusion that those years marked an unprecedented intrusion of politics into the life of the mind, and defended the relativist conception of “openness” that *Closing* had attacked.

Many of Bloom's other prominent left-liberal critics went further than Rorty, finding in *Closing* a bona fide reactionary tract against the progressive gains of Sixties political movements. An emerging consensus saw Bloom not only as a critic of twentieth century movements for racial, economic, and gender equality, but as a dangerously influential opponent of equality and democracy themselves. For Martha Nussbaum, Bloom's description of a proper

63 Richard Rorty, “Straussianism, Democracy, and Allan Bloom I: That Old Time Philosophy,” *The New Republic*, 4 April 1988, in Robert L. Stone, ed., *Essays on the Closing of the American Mind* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1989), 98. That Stone's volume of prominent responses to *Closing* was published only two years after the book itself was a testament to Bloom's ability to generate intellectual controversy.

philosophical education – ostensibly the key to reviving American democracy – was in fact radically anti-democratic. Nussbaum charged Bloom with denying that such education could be accessible to everyone, and especially to women.⁶⁴ Others were not fooled by Bloom's claims to political neutrality, identifying him with what they saw as the Right's reaction against, in Benjamin Barber's words, “what democrats and progressives have accomplished in the last fifty years.”⁶⁵ Few of Bloom's major critics found it necessary to defend “the Sixties” as such, and few claimed to speak for “radical” views of any kind. Rather, their prevailing view was that the social movements that arose during those years were attempts to carry forward a tradition of progressive struggles for social equality that lay at the heart of American liberalism, even if they had at times adopted overly confrontational tactics. Bloom's book, then, not only criticized the particular formulations and tactics of American egalitarian movements during the Sixties, but denounced the notions of equality and progress that liberals took as their fundamental principles.

As left-liberal intellectuals increasingly included the movements of the Sixties in the American progressive tradition, neoconservatives ceased to call themselves liberals as they once had done. Bell, Kristol, and their contemporaries in the late 1960s and early '70s had styled themselves as defenders of both the liberal tradition of political philosophy and the particular institutions of post-war “liberal” society. Bloom seemed to have kept such an understanding of political terms in mind, denying that his book was “neoconservative” on the basis that it was “firmly in the 'liberal tradition.’”⁶⁶ In the 1980s, however, neoconservatism had largely ceased to

64 Martha Nussbaum, “Undemocratic Vistas,” *New York Review of Books*, 5 November 1987, in Stone, *Essays*, 198-209.

65 Benjamin Barber, “The Philosopher Despot: Allan Bloom's Elitist Agenda,” *Harpers Magazine*, January 1988, in Stone, *Essays*, 83. David Rieff, in addition, made sure to point out Bloom's financial connections to conservative institutions such as the Olin Foundation. David Rieff, “The Colonel and the Professor,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 4 September 1987, in Stone, *Essays*, 291-2.

66 Quoted in William Goldstein, “The Story Behind the Bestseller: Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*,” *Publishers Weekly*, 3 July 1987, in Stone, *Essays*, 35.

understand itself as a defense of American liberalism against the radicals on the Left. Rather, neoconservatives conceded that the radical movements of the Sixties had earned a place within the progressive liberal tradition. As a result, they defined themselves as conservative opponents of “liberalism,” joining earlier conservative intellectuals who used the term to speak of the entire American Left – from moderate progressives to Communist fellow travelers – in broad strokes.⁶⁷ Kristol's decision to title his 1983 book, *Reflections of a Neoconservative*, using that political label for the first time, effectively declared that he and his colleagues belonged to the Right, and no longer to “a liberalism that [has] lost its moral and political bearings.”⁶⁸ On these terms, the leading voices of intellectual neoconservatism welcomed Bloom as one of their own. “Make no mistake,” wrote Norman Podhoretz in his review of *Closing*, “though Bloom's focus is on the universities, it is the broader liberal culture that is his main target.”⁶⁹ Bloom did not share Kristol or Podhoretz's willingness to declare himself a conservative. Nor, in fact, did others such as Bell or Glazer whose ties to the movement were much more apparent. Nonetheless, the reception of Bloom's book helped to reveal the shifts in the meanings of “liberal” and “conservative” that defined the political divisions of the late Reagan years.

One of the greatest difficulties the neoconservatives faced as they joined this new conservative coalition was finding common ground with the traditionalist movements of the New Right. Over the course of the 1970s, an assortment of grassroots activist groups had mobilized in order to promote conservative positions on “social issues” such as abortion, school curricula, and

67 Nash notes that such a use of “liberalism” became commonplace during the 1950s, largely thanks to Buckley's efforts at the *National Review* to create a united conservative intellectual front. Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 149.

68 Kristol, *Reflections*, ix.

69 Norman Podhoretz, “The Strange Case of Allan Bloom,” *New York Post*, 30 June 1987.

women's place in the family. By the 1980s, these movements had become one of the most dynamic sources of Reagan's political support.⁷⁰ The activist groups of the New Right shared with a long tradition of conservative intellectuals an absolute conception of moral authority. In other words, they were committed to the belief that there are timeless, fixed values that transcend human experience.⁷¹ In post-Sixties America, as James Davidson Hunter has argued, grassroots conservatives helped to make this moral worldview the foundation of a new kind of politics: a “culture war” in which “political and social hostility [is] rooted in different systems of moral understanding.”⁷² The New Right, however, was not only a moral crusade, but a populist one as well. Traditionalist conservatives in the 1970s and '80s – from the Evangelical Christian Moral Majority to antifeminist leaders such as Phyllis Schlafly – understood their political task as a struggle on behalf of ordinary Americans against “secular humanist” liberal elites, who sought to empty the public sphere of all moral content.⁷³

For the neoconservatives, highly educated and predominantly atheist, the concerns of grassroots traditionalists and Evangelicals were often utterly foreign. Apart from devout Catholics such as Michael Novak and Richard John Neuhaus, neoconservatives found it difficult

70 I use “traditionalist” to refer to a broad coalition of conservative groups, largely devoted to social issues. Though the most prominent of these groups were led by Evangelical Christians, such as Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, I use this more general term in order to indicate that not all conservatives advocating traditional lifestyles and values did so solely on the basis of religious beliefs. An excellent primary source-based account of the New Right – which despite its title, is not exclusively devoted to women or “women's issues” – can be found in Rebecca Klatch, *Women of the New Right* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

71 George Nash's history of American conservatism examines the rebirth of American traditionalist thought in the 1950s, focusing on the writings of Richard Weaver and Eric Vogelin. While there were few conscious collaborations between these intellectuals and the grassroots movements that rose to prominence decades later, both expressed overlapping conservative sentiments. Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 44-56.

72 James Davidson Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 42.

73 Andrew Hartman, for example, cites Evangelical leader Billy James Hargis's fears that liberal government officials sought to “destroy the traditional moral fiber of America and replace it with a pervasive sickly humanism.” Andrew Hartman, “A Trojan Horse for Social Engineering: The Curriculum Wars in Recent American History,” *Journal of Policy History* 25, no. 1 (2013), 120. In this regard, New Right activists carried forward the critique of East-Coast liberal elitism found in the early writings of William Buckley's *National Review*. Nash *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 144.

to reconcile their defense of modern liberal democracy and capitalism with a conservatism whose ultimate appeal was to God and tradition. Furthermore, the grassroots conservatives' anti-elitist rhetoric was often hard to swallow for the erudite former “New York Intellectuals.” In 1985, Daniel Bell had written that this separation from traditionalist conservatism was for the best. The project of strengthening modern institutions through elite theoretical expertise that had originally inspired the neoconservative movement, he argued, had no business associating itself with this anti-intellectual “revolt against modernity.”⁷⁴ For Bell, if joining the Reagan conservative coalition – a “political hippogriff,” as he called it – meant forming such incoherent alliances, then the neoconservatives stood to sacrifice the core of their intellectual project for mere political expediency.⁷⁵ Irving Kristol, in contrast, wrote that neoconservatism had been consistent with a certain understanding of “populism” from the beginning. In his view, the majority of ordinary Americans remained attached to the bourgeois morality that leftist and liberal intellectuals had rejected. The neoconservative “counter-intellectual” task, he explained, was therefore “to infuse American bourgeois orthodoxy with a new self-conscious intellectual rigor... to explain to the American people why they are right, and to the intellectuals why they are wrong.”⁷⁶ Since the days of his and Norman Podhoretz's 1970s polemics against the “adversary culture,” Kristol's vision of neoconservatism, unlike Bell's, had long entailed a project of cultural conflict. In the 1980s, he envisioned a new role for the neoconservative intellectuals in guiding and refining the “culture wars” of the New Right, harnessing the power of these

74 Nash recalls that in the 1950s, Bell had been a part of a group of liberal scholars – including Nathan Glazer, Richard Hofstadter, and Seymour Martin Lipset – who frequently denounced the attempts of then-marginal conservatives to rouse populist sentiments by denouncing an East-Coast liberal elite. Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 138.

75 Daniel Bell, “The Revolt Against Modernity,” *The Public Interest* 81, no. 2 (Fall 1985), 42-63. By these years, as this essay indicated, Bell sought to distance himself from the neoconservative movement he had helped to found.

76 Kristol, *Reflections*, xiv-xv.

popular movements in order to defend of modern institutions.

Bloom's intervention into neoconservative intellectual discourse helped steer the movement away from Bell's project of technocratic expertise, and towards Kristol's vision of cultural warfare. His book was in fact much more effective in appealing to the anti-modern sentiments of the New Right than Kristol's defense of "bourgeois" values. *Closing* articulated a concept of nihilism that both neoconservatives and traditionalists could endorse. Following Strauss, he all but equated nihilism with "relativism," a word that had long been synonymous with the amorality of liberal elites for New Right conservative activists.⁷⁷ Though some of these convergences were merely superficial, there was indeed a deep similarity between Bloom's concerns and those of the traditionalists. For although he was not a philosophical "absolutist," he framed the problem of nihilism in such a way that nonetheless lamented the loss of absolutes. His primary concern was not that Americans had strayed from particular doctrines that he held to be true in a transcendent sense. Rather, the problem of nihilism was that modern culture had ceased to take seriously the notion of the possibility of eternal truths, and had as a result lost the spiritual vitality that arises from the search for such truths.⁷⁸

Bloom's book helped to reveal that despite their philosophical differences, New Right traditionalists and neoconservatives alike were motivated by serious concerns with the effects of modernity on American life. The traditionalists' "culture wars" were an effort to undo what they saw as the toll that modern liberalism had taken on traditional ways of life. Though the

⁷⁷ Hartman, "Trojan Horse," 121. In addition, Nash discusses the use of the term among traditionalist intellectuals in *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 44-5.

⁷⁸ "Absolutism" was one of the most common charges leveled against Bloom's book. See, for example, Henry Allen, "The Right Absolute Allan Bloom," *Washington Post*, 18 June 1987, in Stone, *Essays*, 39-43. In contrast, Sidney Hook criticized Bloom in full awareness of the subtle difference between the latter's critique of nihilism and the defense of absolute truths as such. Though generally sympathetic to Bloom's worldview, and something of a neoconservative himself, Hook argued that a pragmatist standpoint, unburdened by even an abstract commitment to eternal ideas, could establish a more concrete grounding in political reality. Sidney Hook, "The Closing of the American Mind: An Intellectual Best-Seller Revisited," *The American Scholar* 58, no. 1 (Winter 1989):123-35.

neoconservatives were explicitly pro-modern, in contrast to New Right conservatives, both found their *raison d'être* in grappling with, in Andrew Hartman's words, "a world in which all foundations had been pulled out from under, a world in which, at its starkest, 'God is dead.'"⁷⁹ In comparison with his neoconservative allies, Bloom was much more willing to entertain the kind of radical dissent against modernity that prevailed on the traditionalist Right, and his writing displayed far more nostalgia for an imagined past. Though just as much a defense of modernity as the writings of Bell or Kristol, Bloom's book presented the sources of traditionalist conservatives' discontent, such as the collapse of a religious worldview, as part of the problem that neoconservatism sought to address. *Closing's* cultural critique, then, appealed both to traditionalists who believed that modernity had destroyed particular eternally true values, and to neoconservatives whose concern was to protect modern society from the nihilistic attitude it produced in its participants. Reading Bloom, anti-modern traditionalists and neoconservative defenders of modernity could potentially agree on the same sources of American cultural decline in the post-Sixties political landscape.

As the Reagan years came to a close, the neoconservative intellectuals found themselves in an opportune position to put their ideas into political practice. Their project of defending American institutions against nihilism had the potential to serve as a unifying intellectual mission of the conservative Right. In order to realize this potential, they themselves required a coherent formulation of their defense of modernity that could satisfy even the most anti-modern segments of the American Right. It would be an exaggeration to say that Bloom's book provided the definitive solution to the neoconservatives' problem, but nonetheless, it offered one possible means of understanding the new conservative coalition on principle, and had earned enough

⁷⁹ Hartman, "Trojan Horse," 115.

attention to gain significant influence. Whether the neoconservatives would succeed in realizing this potential to exercise leadership over the mainstream Right, however, remained to be seen. Many neoconservatives, like Bell, doubtless remained wary of committing themselves to alliances with the New Right. These included even Bloom himself, who despite the appeals to traditionalism in his writing, admitted to an interviewer that “I don't understand this insistence that I be part of the Moral Majority.”⁸⁰ Yet if Bloom and the neoconservatives were to engage their ideas in actual politics, they required political leaders and movements that were willing to listen. For better or worse, in the late 1980s they found them in Reagan and his alliance of supporters.

IV. Political Correctness and the Rhetoric of Postmodernism

As the 1980s came to a close, Bloom's cultural critique helped to place the neoconservative intellectuals' critique of nihilism at the center of American conservative politics. Just as the campus protests of the Sixties first moved the early neoconservative thinkers to reflect on the problem of nihilism in American life, it was again in the politics of higher education that their successors attempted to lead a conservative coalition in defense of modern institutions. Following Bloom, a number of prominent neoconservative writers attacked various university reforms to curriculum and student life, which they labeled as “political correctness.” In their view, the efforts of left-leaning academics to promote an egalitarianism based on race, class, and gender threatened to undermine the university's role in creating and preserving a common American culture. Though the neoconservative polemics against political correctness in many

⁸⁰ Quoted in Michael W. Hirschorn, “A Professor Decries Closing of the American Mind,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 6 May 1987, in Stone, *Essays*, 48.

cases contributed constructively to discussions of pluralism and the function of education in American society, they were too often carried away by rhetorical excesses. Ultimately, Bloom and his allies adopted a misleading rhetorical language based on a superficial reading of the poststructuralist theory in vogue in certain literary studies departments. These neoconservatives came to define their liberal and leftist opponents as the agents of a “postmodern” age, an age of nihilism in which all prior standards of truth have been disqualified as the tools of white male domination. Though this language was useful in denouncing opponents and in solidifying alliances with conservative allies, it marked a shift away from the neoconservatives' original conception of their political project. As Bloom and the neoconservatives settled into their roles as intellectuals of the American Right in the 1990s, “nihilism,” as they had come to use the word, had taken on an entirely different meaning.

By the end of the Reagan years, the question of how to remain a part of the new conservative coalition became a serious dilemma for the neoconservative intellectuals. As Vaïsse observes, both of the common enemies they had shared with the business and foreign policy Right – the New Left and global Communism – could not be taken quite as seriously. The radical movements of the 1960s and '70s, for the most part, no longer presented themselves in public as such, and the Soviet Union stood on the verge of collapse.⁸¹ This new political landscape confronted the neoconservatives with an identity crisis. Was their intellectual predisposition merely the reaction of an outmoded liberalism against the particular historical situation of the Sixties, or was it adaptable to the conditions of modern American life more generally? Could the neoconservatives' reflections on nihilism and authority, furthermore, serve as the foundation of a

81 Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 220. For a similar interpretation, see Dorrien, *The Neoconservative Mind*, 349.

lasting conservative worldview? For many neoconservatives, *Closing's* revelation of an overlap between the polemics of neoconservative intellectuals and the “culture wars” of the grassroots traditionalist Right suggested that indeed, the neoconservatives still had a role to play in American politics. In the coming years, the neoconservatives followed Bloom in locating the academy as the source of an ongoing cultural crisis, believing that recent trends in higher education proved the ongoing relevance of their campaign against the threat of nihilism.

Bloom's arguments became implicated in concrete debates over academic issues largely thanks to the efforts of Secretary of Education William Bennett. First as director of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) in the early 1980s, and subsequently in Reagan's cabinet from 1985 to 1988, Bennett saw a defense of traditional curricula in American colleges and universities as the hallmark of his career in public office. A devout Catholic with a PhD in political philosophy, he sought to make preserving the Western literary and philosophical canon a conservative issue.⁸² As director of the NEH, Bennett had published a pamphlet in 1984 entitled “To Reclaim a Legacy,” which purported to reveal that American humanities education had suffered drastic declines in both student enrollment and the quality of instruction. Though the pamphlet's recommendations were relatively modest calls to strengthen core curricula, its diagnosis of the problem was rather alarmist. Bennett wrote that recent college graduates were no longer schooled in their basic cultural heritage; universities had lost their sense of common purpose; and standards that previously designated who was educated and who was not were now

⁸² Dorrien notes that Bennett's nomination for head of the NEH was a point of contention between neo- and paleoconservatives, the heirs of traditionalist intellectuals such as Russell Kirk. Paleoconservatives supported Mel Bradford for the position, in the attempt to resist the neoconservatives' increasing prominence on the mainstream Right. Both conservative camps wrote in order to persuade Reagan officials to accept their preferred candidate. Irving Kristol's successful attempt to pull William Buckley and the *National Review* to the neoconservative side doubtless played a large role in Bennett's nomination. Dorrien, *The Neoconservative Mind*, 343.

obsolete.⁸³ One did not have to be a conservative to share Bennett's aim to strengthen and preserve traditional humanistic instruction. Nevertheless, Bennett concurred with the neoconservative narrative that the source of the current educational decline was “a collective loss of nerve and faith ... during the late 1960s and early 1970s.”⁸⁴ For the remainder of his career in the Reagan Administration, Bennett repeatedly spoke out against what he saw as the liberal-Left agenda in the humanities, seeking to deny government support to cultural and academic initiatives informed by radical ideologies.⁸⁵

Encouraged by the success of Bloom's bestseller, which had made similar diagnoses of the post-Sixties university, Bennett began to emerge as a public intellectual in his own right. Bennett helped to politicize Bloom's ideas, especially following the decision of Stanford University in early 1988 to reform its introductory courses in Western civilization. A major motivation for these reforms were student and faculty advocates of the idea that such “great books” courses should offer more texts that represent the viewpoints of women and oppressed ethnic groups. As a result, Stanford replaced its original course in “Western Culture,” with a choice of eight different tracks within a new program known as “Culture, Ideas, and Values,” one of which was primarily devoted to integrating women and minority authors into the traditional curriculum of classic texts.⁸⁶ Convinced that such actions represented a further assault on the humanities, Secretary Bennett flew to Palo Alto to speak on the subject in a well-publicized debate with Stanford's president. Invoking Bloom's authority, Bennett warned: “Does anyone doubt that selecting works based on the ethnicity or gender of their authors trivializes the academic

83 Bennett, *Legacy*, 1-2, 5-18.

84 *Ibid*, 18.

85 Hartman, “Trojan Horse,” 127-8.

86 See the clarifying letter to the editor of the *Wall Street Journal* sent by Stanford assistant dean Charles Junkerman, “Stanford's Philosophy is an Open Book,” 6 January 1989, in Stone, *Essays*, 367-8.

enterprise? Does anyone really doubt the political agenda underlying these provisions? These events ... serve as a striking example of what Allan Bloom has called 'The Closing of the American Mind.'"⁸⁷

The presence of Bloom and Bennett – the “killer B's,” as they became known – as public figures helped to unify and mobilize neoconservative voices in opposition to what they saw as a new form of radical leftism in the academy.⁸⁸ Bennett's words during the Stanford controversy set the tone for a series of debates in which neoconservatives, often invoking Bloom's name, denounced liberal and leftist academics for abandoning serious intellectual pursuits in the name of “political correctness.” This new term in neoconservative discourse referred to a supposed project of reshaping university life so as to promote an equality of race, class, and gender.⁸⁹ In addition to curriculum reforms, neoconservatives also rallied against the practice of many colleges and universities during those years of drafting codes of student conduct in order to prevent incidents of racism or homophobia. According to Herbert London, in a declaration of the National Association of Scholars's (NAS) opposition to political correctness, the radical egalitarianism of the Sixties had infiltrated the “liberal majority” of American colleges and universities.⁹⁰ In other words, the New Left had not been defeated, but rather, its positions had become part of mainstream liberalism. This radicalization of American liberalism, furthermore, was to be found in its purest form in the university. For neoconservatives in the late 1980s and

87 Quoted in William Bennett, *The De-Valuing of America: The Fight for Our Culture and our Children* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 171.

88 Some also added to the list of “B's” Saul Bellow, who occasionally joined his friend Bloom in echoing the neoconservative positions in these emerging debates, as well as the “killer C” Lynne Cheney, Bennett's successor at the NEH who took over much of his political program.

89 Paul Berman observed at the time that the term “political correctness” originated as a term of approval for orthodox Marxist positions among members of the American Communist Party, and continued as a tongue-in-cheek jab among later leftist groups. Neoconservatives, many of whom having begun their careers on the radical Left, were well aware of the term's Leninist connotations. Paul Berman, “The Debate and its Origins,” in Berman, ed. *Debating P.C.: The Controversy over Political Correctness on College Campuses* (New York: Dell, 1992), 5.

90 Herbert London, “A Call to the Academy,” *Academic Questions* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1987-8), 1-2.

early '90s, then, the emergence of “political correctness” proved that their war against the adversary impulses of the New Left remained relevant.

At its best, the neoconservative opposition to “political correctness” represented a concern that the university should promote a common national culture. Many of the initiatives that they denounced under this label were the products of serious attempts to understand the meaning of universalism in a culturally diverse society. The authors of *Speaking for the Humanities* – the American Council of Learned Societies's 1989 rebuttal to recent neoconservative polemics – were right to point out that America's history of racism, sexism, and class exploitation made necessary the redefinition of what various groups held in common, and that this new understanding should play a role in college curricula.⁹¹ Bloom, Bennett, and their allies resisted such efforts, convinced that the motivation for criticism of “the” American common culture was to attack the very notion of a community united by universally shared ideas. Yet in so doing, they nonetheless contributed a conservative perspective to this discussion, defending existing or traditional conceptions of what it meant to be an American. As a result, neoconservatives often equated their own defense of the humanities with New Right conservatives' struggles to preserve family values. As Hartman observes, for example, Bennett became famous for linking Bloom's warnings of the demise of “great books” curricula with the traditionalists' fear of that liberal secularists had taken control of American education.⁹²

Bloom's own understanding of his role in the political correctness debates he helped to start

91 George Levine, et al, ed., *Speaking for the Humanities* (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 1989), 3, 16.

92 Hartman, “Trojan Horse,” 127-8. The neoconservatives' “leftist” opponents too were often guilty of sweeping rhetorical simplifications. For example, critics of the neoconservatives tended to lump E.D. Hirsch's 1987 book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Vintage, 1988) – a Deweyan progressive case for the teaching of a common cultural vocabulary – alongside *Closing* as an example of the Right's insensitivity to the culture of oppressed groups. It was perhaps Hirsch's misfortune to reach the *New York Times* bestseller list at the same time as Bloom, who shared little of his commitment to Dewey's project of promoting democratic community.

was rife with contradictions. On the one hand, he repeatedly made a point to disavow his participation in any Right-wing movements, claiming to remain standing on the politically neutral ground of academic philosophy. “I am not a conservative,” he declared bluntly in a well-known 1988 speech at Harvard, “neo- or paleo-.”⁹³ On the other hand, his active involvement in the neoconservative crusade against “political correctness” was undeniable. In the same speech, he affirmed the need to combat the “new 'nonelitist,' 'nonexclusionary' curriculum in the humanities.... an extremely radical project whose supporters pass it off as mainstream.”⁹⁴ Furthermore, Bloom proved just as willing as Bennett to make use of populist conservative rhetoric. In a joint interview given with Bennett for *Conservative Digest*, for example, he characterized the nihilism of contemporary radical professors as “a conspiracy of sorts in the liberal arts.”⁹⁵ Despite his own philosophical “elitism,” Bloom seemed comfortable casting “politically correct” academics as an intellectual fringe, an enemy against which both traditionalist conservatives and neoconservative defenders of the humanities could unite.

These increasingly frequent appeals to the rhetoric of culture wars helped lead the neoconservatives to equate “political correctness” with “postmodernism,” a fashionable term in recent discourse. The word first gained currency in the artistic criticism of the 1960s, as an attempt to identify a new sensibility to follow the aesthetics of high modernism. In the 1980s and early '90s, neoconservatives invested it with a much more momentous significance. Following critics such as Hilton Kramer, editor of the art journal *The New Criterion*, neoconservatives began to use “postmodernism” to refer not only to a shift in aesthetic styles, but to a nihilistic

93 Published under the name “Western Civ,” the speech appears in Bloom, *Giants and Dwarfs*, 17.

94 Ibid, 15.

95 William Armisted, “Education Secretary William Bennett and Author Allan Bloom,” *Conservative Digest*, April 1988, 26.

world-historical epoch, in which the rationalism of modern politics and thought ceased to exist.⁹⁶ Neoconservatives claimed to find evidence for such a view in the writings of “poststructuralist” French thinkers who had recently gained a wide academic following in the United States, primarily Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.⁹⁷ A major project of Foucault's early writings was to show the rationalist humanism of Enlightenment philosophy to have been grounded in particular historical conditions that were coming to an end. Though he later revised this presentation of his views, Foucault's pronouncement of the “death of man,” or the move away from a philosophy centered on the free-thinking individual, was easy to read as a celebration of a “postmodern” era.⁹⁸ Derrida, for his part, developed a philosophy of “deconstruction” that highlighted the inherent uncertainty of the central metaphysical distinctions of modern Western philosophy. Deconstruction became highly influential in the United States as a number of prominent theorists in American English departments applied it to the study of literature during the 1970s and '80s.⁹⁹ The writings of Foucault, Derrida, and others associated with “French Theory” did not typically endorse subversive political action in an explicit manner, and were often highly ambivalent about the radical epistemologies they described. For the neoconservatives, however, the influence they achieved in contemporary academia largely sufficed as proof that a radical nihilistic critique of Enlightenment rationalism had taken hold of the American university.

96 Brick, *Contradiction*, 58-61. See Hilton Kramer, “Postmodern: Art and Culture in the 1980s,” *The New Criterion*, September 1980.

97 François Cusset argues that it was only in the United States that these assorted left-wing French philosophers and intellectuals, who wrote primarily in the 1960s and '70s, came to be seen as part of a single canon of thought, known in various contexts as “poststructuralism,” “postmodern theory,” or simply “French Theory.” François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 8.

98 In 1966, for example, he wrote that “man is neither the oldest nor the most constant problem that poses itself to human knowledge,” and that the concept of “man” would soon cease to hold its meaning. Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses: Une archaéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 398, my translation.

99 Cusset, *French Theory*, 77-8

Bloom did not endorse the view that “postmodernism” was the latest and most dangerous incarnation of American nihilism until after he had immersed himself in the debates over political correctness. In *Closing*, he had derisively (and unfairly) characterized the writings of Foucault and Derrida as a mere passing fad among American academics.¹⁰⁰ His general view was that the nihilism that was closing America's mind had its roots deep in the nation's political and cultural traditions, and not merely in the latest Continental philosophy. By 1990, in contrast, he had come to accept “postmodernism” as an explanation for both the hostility his book received and the support for “political correctness” among college students and faculty.¹⁰¹ As he wrote in *Giants and Dwarfs*, the “students of the sixties [have become] the professors of the eighties.... Now the professors are way out in front of the students.... [using] the students to further their “postmodernist agenda” in the battle against Eurocentrism.”¹⁰² This belief in a continuity between the nihilism of the radicals of the Sixties and the “political correctness” of the 1990s became a hallmark of the neoconservative critique of “postmodernism” in the following years.

Following Bloom's example, a number of younger neoconservative writers began to take up a critique of the “postmodern” American Left in the early 1990s. Few did more to popularize an aversion to “postmodernism” and “deconstructionism” on the conservative Right than Roger Kimball, an editor of *The New Criterion*. Kimball's 1990 bestseller *Tenured Radicals* – which, like *Closing*, had been funded by the John M. Olin Foundation – was less a philosophical critique

100 Bloom, *Closing*, 379. Cf. 226, 320, and 352.

101 In Cusset's analysis, the various movements for race, class, and gender equality in American universities picked up on certain elements of poststructuralist theory to suit their purposes. It could be said, for example, that attempts to censor racist speech found their justification in Foucault's analysis of the power structures at work in language, or that Derrida's concept of “Eurocentrism” motivated reforms to courses in “Western Civ” such as the ones at Stanford. Cusset is right to insist, however, that these theoretical innovations merely converged with intellectual trends that had already long been at work, such as Deweyan liberalism, to feminist arguments for censorship, and progressive trends in the field of social history. Though such trends may still have attracted the neoconservatives' criticism, they could be much less plausibly derided as “postmodern” than “French Theory,” an esoteric foreign import. Cusset, *French Theory*, 131-72.

102 Bloom, *Giants and Dwarfs*, 347.

of poststructuralism than a polemical *exposé* of its supposedly pernicious influence on the American academy. Having attended conferences of the Council of Learned Societies and the Modern Language Association (MLA) to collect evidence, Kimball not only ridiculed the scholarly merits of deconstructionist or feminist theory, but pronounced them as “ideologically motivated assaults on the intellectual and moral substance of our culture.”¹⁰³ As the book's title suggested, Kimball agreed wholeheartedly with the view of Bloom and others that the contemporary academic Left was the heir of the student radicals of the Sixties, using its tenured faculty positions to continue an assault on American democracy. Furthermore, following Bennett, he sought to frame the debate over “political correctness” not merely as a disagreement over literary theory or undergraduate curricula, but as a cultural conflict between a radical academic elite and the majority of ordinary Americans.¹⁰⁴ New to this rhetoric, however, was the notion that the radical ideology that linked the New Left of the Sixties and the “politically correct” academics of the Nineties was the product of a historically novel “postmodern” impulse. For the neoconservatives of these years, the threat of nihilism appeared less an inherent danger of modern American life, than as a threat from an alien political and cultural worldview.

As Kimball was joined soon after by Dinesh D'Souza, a young emigrant from India and another recipient of Olin funds, the critique of postmodernism set the tone for neoconservative polemical discourse in the early 1990s.¹⁰⁵ Yet unlike the New Left that had been the target of earlier neoconservative attacks, the supposed movement of academic radicals they spoke of was

103 Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), xviii. Kimball's principal stylistic device was an appeal to absurdity. He often simply reproduced the titles of papers given at these conferences – his favorite being Eve Sedgwick's “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,” presented at the MLA's 1990 convention – expecting that their shock value would be self-evident.

104 Ibid, 184.

105 D'Souza's 1991 book *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: Free Press, 1991), though more judicious in its tone than Kimball's, nonetheless shared the bulk of Kimball's view of the cultural implications of postmodernism and political correctness.

a caricature, and had little relevance to actually existing Left political movements. This caricature was made easier by statements like those of Henry Louis Gates, who wrote in praise of “the rainbow coalition of contemporary critical theory,” which included, among others, feminists, Marxists, and deconstructionists. The professors who formed this new coalition, Gates continued, were part of “the generation that took over buildings in the late 1960s.”¹⁰⁶ Of course, not all who were identified with the “postmodern Left” were as willing as Gates to assent to the neoconservatives’ image of them, and rightly so.¹⁰⁷ Though there was some truth to the idea that certain contemporary theoretical movements endorsed a concept of the “postmodern,” the elision between such academic discourse and the post-Sixties American Left as a whole was largely groundless. The major left-liberal critics of *Closing*, for example, though mildly sympathetic to the aims of Sixties movements, found it possible to take issue with Bloom without citing Derrida.¹⁰⁸ In fact, America’s intellectuals on the Left were often equally hostile to “postmodernism” as their neoconservative counterparts.¹⁰⁹ This idea of a postmodern academic Left, though mostly fictional, was a strategically effective invention of the “political correctness” debates, a polemical critique of nihilism that appealed to populist traditions of distrust towards intellectual elites.

106 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Whose Canon Is It, Anyway?” *New York Times Book Review*, 26 February 1989, in Berman, *Debating P.C.*, 190, 193.

107 See, for example, Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s introduction to Darryl J. Gless and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, eds., *The Politics of Liberal Education* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1992), 2-4.

108 Richard Rorty, furthermore, the leading adherent of pragmatist liberalism, repudiated both the academic Left’s dismissal of the idea of a common American culture and its sympathy for revolutionary rhetoric. At the same time, he praised in broad strokes the poststructuralists’ critique of rationalist epistemology. Richard Rorty, “Two Cheers for the Cultural Left,” in Gless and Smith, *Liberal Education*, 234-9.

109 Christopher Lasch, for example, a prominent historian with both Marxist and New Left leanings, included chapter on “Academic Pseudo-Radicalism” in his 1992 magnum opus that made evident certain overlaps with the neoconservative project. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991), 176-92. Additionally, many Marxist scholars followed Jürgen Habermas’s philosophical defense of the idea of a rational public sphere against the poststructuralists in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990).

Despite its imprecision, this concept of the “postmodern,” had the further function of allowing neoconservatives to maintain a geopolitical understanding of the threats to liberal democracy even after the fall of Soviet Communism. For the neoconservatives to cast their leftist opponents as “postmodern” was to *externalize* them, to identify them with a world-historical force that was wholly alien to the philosophical framework of America's governing institutions. In the aftermath of the Sixties, the early neoconservative intellectuals had understood their New Left opponents as the representatives of a nihilism that had grown out of America's own political and cultural history. Though they took global Communism to be a serious threat to the American way of life, they understood its origins as distinct from those of the “adversary culture.” In a post-Soviet geopolitical landscape, on the other hand, neoconservatives equated their domestic antagonists with the kind of external threat that Communism once represented. This was especially true for those who had become used to collaborating with hawkish Reagan foreign policy officials. Midge Decter, for example, chair of the Committee for the Free World, declared in 1990 that as long as “America's ... universities packaged anti-intellectual sophistries as learning,” the anti-Communist think-tank still had a role to play in American politics.¹¹⁰ Even after the fall of the Berlin Wall, neoconservatives could continue to link their struggle against nihilism at home to a crusade against enemies abroad, real or imaginary.

Remarkably, the critique of postmodernism during the “political correctness” debates allowed the neoconservatives' concept of nihilism to converge simultaneously with both a populist anti-elitism and a geopolitical hawkishness. Having embraced his newfound role as a neoconservative public intellectual, Bloom came to express this rhetorical convergence as well as any of his allies. In an address he gave to a committee of congressmen in 1991, shortly before his

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Dorrien, *The Neoconservative Mind*, 350.

health began to fail the following year, he suggested that “the next threat to democracy” would arise in part from new intellectual movements such as deconstructionism, which originated in “nihilistic” German philosophy. “It is just a short step from these beliefs,” he insisted, referring rather sensationally to Derrida's Heideggerian roots, “to the sensitivity training and the reforms of the curriculum which are offered now not only for college freshmen but go down all the way to kindergarten.”¹¹¹ In Bloom's statements, the global age of nihilism and “sensitivity training” – part of secular liberalism's agenda in public education, in the language of New Right activists – appeared seamlessly, if implausibly, in a single enemy. As the political correctness debates drew to a close, the neoconservatives achieved a remarkable synthesis of their ideas with those of their allies in grassroots New Right movements and foreign policy officials. Bloom, who only a few years prior sought to avoid participation in political life, now found himself at the center of an intellectual movement that had made serious inroads in shaping American conservative politics.

111 Address by Allan Bloom to the Congressional Clearinghouse on the Future, Allan D. Bloom Papers, Box 2, Folder 13.

Conclusion: The Closing of the Neoconservative Mind?

The philosopher ceases to be a philosopher at the moment at which the 'subjective certainty' of a solution becomes stronger than his awareness of the problematic character of that solution. At that moment the sectarian is born. – Leo Strauss¹¹²

In one of Allan Bloom's most perplexing statements in *The Closing of the American Mind*, he disavowed any intentions that his social critique contribute to the improvement of American society at large. The philosopher or teacher of philosophy was under no responsibility to satisfy the demands of the political order in which the university exists, for as he put it, “I thought and think that society is ministerial to the university,” and not vice versa.¹¹³ In writing these words, Bloom could not have failed to have taken into account Leo Strauss's reflections on the political status of philosophical inquiry. Aware of the ease with which philosophy can degenerate into “sectarianism,” Strauss remained skeptical of the ability of intellectuals to bridge the gap between the philosopher's understanding of the political good and what must be done in political reality. The irony was that Bloom echoed these ideas after he had already left the territory of philosophy and become, to borrow Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen's words, an “accidental public intellectual.”¹¹⁴ Bloom's encounter with the neoconservative intellectual project demonstrated that contrary to his own insistences, philosophy all but inevitably must implicate itself in the problems of political life. Having inherited a philosophical understanding of nihilism and its place in modern life from Strauss and others, Bloom joined the neoconservatives in their attempt to mitigate its effects in contemporary America after the disillusionment of the Sixties.

At its best, neoconservatism offered a reflection on the conditions of modern American life that tended to produce attitudes of disillusionment and alienation. Though its central theoretical

112 Leo Strauss, “Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*,” 196.

113 Bloom, *Closing*, 245.

114 Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche*, 310.

insights emerged in response to the political and cultural crisis of the Sixties, the discussion of nihilism it helped to begin carried implications far beyond the struggle against the counterculture and the New Left. This neoconservatism had the potential to serve as an intelligent basis of a conservative politics that could address the concerns of various groups on the Right, while at the same time engaging in thoughtful dialogue with those on the Left and center. Such discussions were there to be had at the beginning of the 1990s, for example with neo-pragmatists such as Richard Rorty and E.D. Hirsch; liberal political theorists such as John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin; and “communitarian” thinkers such as Christopher Lasch, Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Walzer, and Robert Bellah.¹¹⁵

As Bloom's book helped his new allies connect this political mission with the “culture wars” prevailing on the American Right, however, these constructive discussions appeared ever less likely. From a purely intellectual standpoint, the neoconservatives' success in engaging with mainstream conservatism proved costly, for the paradigm of cultural warfare led them to a degenerated version of their own positions during the debates over “political correctness.” The notion of a “postmodern Left,” was largely an invention of this neoconservative rhetoric, led to a diminished understanding of what nihilism meant for contemporary American society. What had been most powerful about the social critique of Bloom, Bell, Kristol, and their allies was their diagnosis of nihilism as an internal danger of American society. Understanding the tendencies of democracy and capitalism to undermine their own claims to legitimacy, they hoped, would lead to a more honest assessment of the problems that Americans faced in their political and cultural life. The idea of “postmodernism,” in contrast, served to shift the responsibility for the problem

115 Bellah's review of *Closing* admonished Bloom for his failure to engage in conversation with thinkers such as himself who had long been writing on similar issues. Robert Bellah, “Academic Fundamentalism,” *New Oxford Review* 54, no. 6 (July-August 1987), in Stone, *Essays*, 91-3.

of nihilism onto external enemies. Despite neoconservatism's origins in a philosophically sophisticated critique of American institutions, then, its adherents in the 1990s began to turn a blind eye to the shortcomings of the political, economic, and cultural status quo.

This postmodern understanding of nihilism, despite its flaws, has nonetheless become an integral aspect of neoconservative thought over the last few decades. Although he did not bear full responsibility for such developments, Bloom's participation in the polemics of the late 1980s and early '90s captured remarkably the shifts in the neoconservatives' vocabulary as they increased their influence over American conservative politics. Over the next several decades, this influence would only increase, peaking in the early 2000s as neoconservative thinkers played an instrumental role in advising and crafting the foreign policy of George Bush's Administration. There is an unmistakable similarity between the rhetoric of postmodernism and the calls of Robert Kagan and William Kristol in 2000 that “American statesmen today ought to recognize that their charge is not to await the arrival of the next great threat. Rather, it is to shape the international environment to prevent such a threat from arising.”¹¹⁶ The philosophical orientation that originally motivated both Bloom and his contemporaries such as Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol had little to do with the interventionist foreign policy projects that one now associates with neoconservatism, yet merely to observe this does not fully account for the present situation. From the neoconservatives' philosophical origin, a great variety of political pathways were possible. In many respects, the path that has led the neoconservative intellectual movement to its current political position has been the one charted, at times reluctantly and inadvertently, by the author of *The Closing of the American Mind*.

116 Robert Kagan and William Kristol, “Burden of Power Is Having to Wield It,” *Washington Post*, 19 March 2000, quoted in Vaisse, *Neoconservatism*, 232.

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