

HARRY V. JAFFA, 1918–2015

Bradley C. S. Watson

When Harry V. Jaffa died on January 10 of this year, he left a legacy that the conservative intellectual movement will be sifting for generations. More than anything else, he represented the constitutionalist strain of modern American conservatism. Indeed, he invented it. It was Jaffa who brought Leo Strauss's approach to political inquiry to bear squarely on America and the American founding. For Jaffa and his students, a close reading of the Great Books of Western civilization includes a close reading of the words and deeds of America's Founders. And it includes the words and deeds of the greatest interpreters of the Founders, especially Abraham Lincoln.

But Jaffa was an Aristotle scholar before he was a Lincoln scholar, and his approach to political inquiry—which would become known as “West Coast Straussism” or the “Claremont School”—recognizes that politics is ultimately a practical rather than a theoretical science. Deeds matter, and particularly the deeds of great statesmen. When such statesmen can also write—as could

Lincoln or Churchill, in spades—political art and understanding come together in a scrutable manner. Through this, students catch glimpses of political reality—and the higher reality toward which it points, including the primary question of the good. For Jaffa, to aim straight for the higher on the basis of philosophic rationalism is a fool's errand. West Coast Straussians continue, on the whole, to eschew esoteric debates and have much broader sympathies than philosophy merely. They care about America and about the moral-political order. They learned such care from the master: there was never a tone of condescension in Harry's voice when he spoke of those things, which was almost all the time.

For Jaffa, the fundamental antithesis of the modern age was between nature and history. Historicism—the belief that truth and justice are always and everywhere relative to their time and place and thus mere human constructs—is nihilism. Without a standard of judgment arising from inquiry into the nature of man qua man, any conservatism

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is destined to be adrift. Over the course of Western history, political thought has shifted, broadly speaking, from the natural right of the ancients, to the natural law of revealed religion, to the natural rights of early modernity, to the historicism of post-modernity—the second and third building on and borrowing from what went before. Early modernity expanded and corrected the Western synthesis—man is not only a political and rational animal but also an equal animal.

It is at this point, according to Jaffa, that American conservatives have a duty to stand athwart history and yell, *Stop!* That is what the American Founders had done—men to be admired not simply because they were founders but because they were right. They brought Athens and Jerusalem together—or at least into close proximity—by seeing the rational dignity of all men, not just philosophers or nobles, and identifying the political truth that would, and should, set men free. Jaffa and his students came to see it as a truth that is complete and sufficient for decent politics, finding themselves in agreement with Calvin Coolidge: “About the Declaration there is a finality that is exceedingly restful. . . . If all men are created equal, that is final. If they are endowed with inalienable rights, that is final. If governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, that is final. No advance, no progress can be made beyond these propositions.”

Jaffa thus laid down a challenge that his students have picked up, and have made central to contemporary conservative thought. They have made clear the depth and enduring significance of the American founding, as well as of American progressivism’s rejection of founding principles on the basis of a peculiarly American historicism. The progressives readily blended social Darwinism and pragmatism, and in some instances even

German idealism, to argue not only against the fixed truths of the Founders’ Constitution but against any politics resting on something other than the shifting sands of time. It is the progressives who, to American ears, most loudly and successfully yell, *Go!* While American progressives are a mere subset of a larger historicist movement that defines the crisis of Western civilization—that is, the crisis of political thought—this crisis can be seen in its fullness in America, and must be resisted first and foremost here.

It’s well known that Jaffa was in every sense a political animal, both witnessing and contributing to the birth of the modern American conservative movement. He knew—before countless blithe suggestions to the contrary, emanating from both left and right—that morality is real, and that it is fantasy to suggest it can or should be removed from politics. On the contrary, any scholarship of politics worthy of the name must first figure out what morality is, then figure out how best to inject it at every point of public life.

It’s worth noting that Jaffa’s notorious moral earnestness was no idiosyncrasy but related to his insistence on proper political and philosophic reason, and his deep concern that the conditions for the exercise of such reason were being undermined. His vehement opposition to the mainstreaming of homosexuality, for example, rested on his view that it would be impossible to recognize natural standards in a world that denied the most obvious and elemental articulation of the laws of nature and nature’s God: the man-woman distinction. But theoretical reason was not Jaffa’s *raison d’être*. The denial of the naturalness of the family would in turn undermine the civic virtues and capacities on which regimes have always depended.

Jaffa penned the most memorable part of

Barry Goldwater's 1964 acceptance speech—"Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice"—and argued with conservatives no less than liberals, almost until his dying breath. But his arguments were always directed at encouraging fellow citizens to see the truth of natural rights, and with that the truth and goodness of the American experiment. Jaffa firmly held that it does not profit a man to claim the mantle of conservatism yet know not what he must conserve, or to believe that those things worth conserving are manifested only in ever-changing history. So he refused to allow that America was nothing more than an agglomeration of consenting states united by experience and interest, yet lacking awareness of the root of consent in the nature of things.

Despite his well-earned reputation as a curmudgeon, those who knew Jaffa could only marvel at his generosity—especially with his time. He was the closest I have seen, at least in single-minded intensity, to Socrates strolling the marketplace (which was Honnold Library of the Claremont Colleges, when I knew him), constantly exhorting and pestering all around him to examine their judgments and think clearly about politics and morality. Jaffa could be remarkably kind, yet he was always intellectually demanding—though not, for the most part, of liberals whom he thought beyond hope. He directed much of his considerable combative energy toward fellow conservatives, including his own students, whom he thought had strayed from the path.

I recall the dressing down I received in print for something I had written that was too sparing, in Jaffa's estimation, of one of his nemeses, Judge Robert H. Bork. I felt then that I had arrived. I remember, too, his animation when he was talking politics, and especially Lincoln's politics. Once, as I chaired a panel consisting of him and another

eminent Lincoln scholar, at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, I watched in slow-motion horror as the then eighty-year-old Jaffa, in the midst of an intense intellectual engagement, fell clean off an elevated platform onto a concrete floor covered by only the thinnest of carpets. He leapt to his feet to climb back up and continue the conversation, as if nothing had happened.

Throughout it all, I took him to be a happy warrior, not blinded by either philosophy or tradition, and always capable of seeing the genuine human good on which America was based, to which it could still aspire, and which at its best it could still realize. He longed neither for a philosophic race of kings, nor an illusory past perfect. He lived for the argument, from which he always thought something lasting might be gained.

Jaffa's erudition was as legendary as his argumentativeness. In my first regular academic job, as a visiting assistant professor of government at Claremont McKenna College, I occupied the Harry V. Jaffa chair in political philosophy: I was assigned to his recently vacated office, as the great man, now retired from regular teaching, held court in the library. The small room was still filled to the ceiling with his books and papers, including carefully typed notes from Strauss's classes, lovingly transcribed over the years by Strauss's students. Jaffa's collection—spanning literature (especially Shakespeare), political philosophy, history, biography, and more—was stunning. It was all there, alas he was not—as if to remind me of something I already knew. Political science departments are no longer staffed by such learned men.

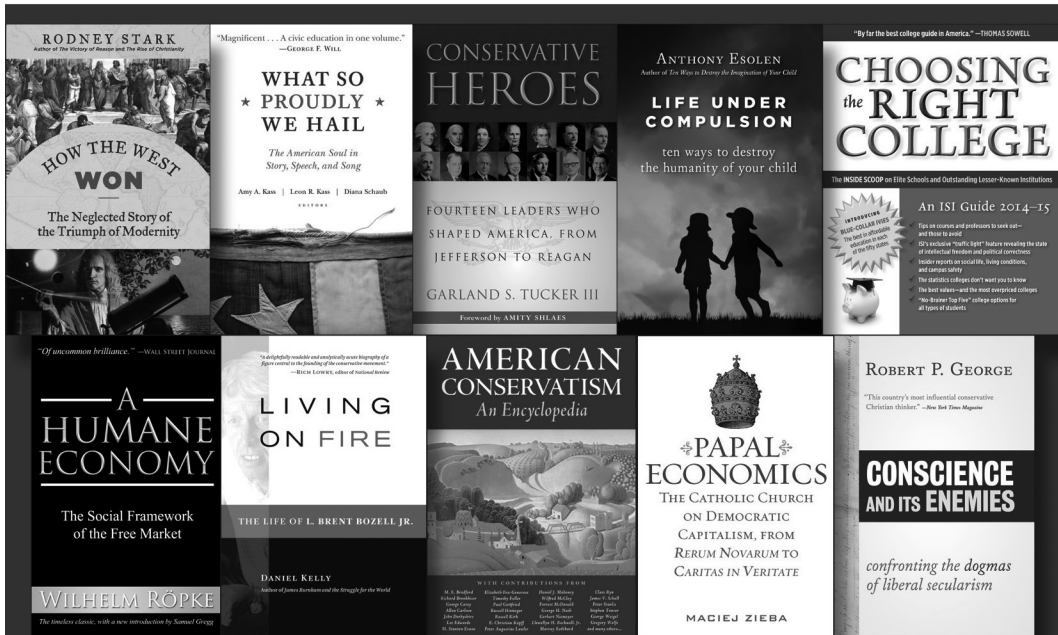
The powerful influence of the interesting scenes of Harry's life will one day vanish, as even his students must eventually

be overcome by the all-resistless hurricane. But in his ambition to pursue “the scholarship of the politics of freedom” and thereby preserve the capability of a people to govern themselves, Harry V. Jaffa will be immortal.

While even Claremont seems little interested in carrying on his legacy, the vital remnants of his work increasingly define mainstream intellectual conservatism. Harry would be happy, but he’d find much to argue about. †

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