The Way We Hate Now
by William Voegeli
My first direct acquaintance with Harry Jaffa was a phone call in the middle of the night. I learned afterward that this was not an unusual occurrence—for others as well as myself. But at that time, in 2005, I was quite unprepared for it. I had just published Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America, and in order to co-opt some lines of hostile questioning, I announced in the introduction ("for the benefit of the hunters of subtexts") that, even though I applauded Abraham Lincoln's exercise of the virtue of prudence in politics, this should not make readers imagine I had become possessed of an unhealthy preoccupation with the neo-classicism of Leo Strauss. After all, I explained, "I can cheerfully confess to never having read Leo Strauss."

This disturbed Harry. "Hello, this is Harry Jaffa," he barked into the phone (as I whispered to my wife, "It's Harry Jaffa!"). "What do you mean saying that you don't know anything about Leo Strauss?"

"No," I replied, "I really can't call myself a Straussian (unless you mean Richard Strauss or Johann Strauss). I've never read Leo Strauss."

"Well," Harry replied, "you've read me!"

That became the answer to everything I'd ever wanted to know about Leo Strauss but had been too politically-unlettered to ask.

Philosopher and Patriot

It was not atypical for Harry Victor Jaffa to regard himself as an extension of Leo Strauss. As I would subsequently learn—and, yes, I finally did read Leo Strauss—Harry was one of Strauss's greatest pupils, and probably had more to do with the translation of Strauss's ideas into an American idiom than any other single individual. Actually, I had met Harry 15 years before, but the meeting was indirect, through a copy of his Crisis of the House Divided I picked-up in a second-hand book barn in West Chester, Pennsylvania, while I was still a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania. I had been prepared up till that moment to regard Abraham Lincoln as an admirable and even skillful politician, but not more than that. The prevailing interpretations of Lincoln, and of the great debates with Stephen A. Douglas which Jaffa analyzed, portrayed Lincoln as something of a disappointment in the debates, as were the debates themselves. David Potter's magisterial survey, The Impending Crisis (in the New American Nation series), had only appeared in 1977, blandly panning Lincoln in 1858 as “trapped in a conflict of values” between emancipation and the Union. Biographers had yet to produce a challenge to Albert Beveridge's Progressive dismissal of the debates as deserving “little notice.”

Jaffa changed this completely. He, too, had met Lincoln and the debates in a second-hand bookstore, through a copy of the debate texts he thumbed-through so assiduously that he kept returning to the store until he had saved-up enough money to buy the book. Unlike the
Progressive historians, Jaffa had found in Lincoln’s challenge to Douglas an American voice that matched the classical power Strauss had taught him to find in Aristotle and Plato. “After a while, I realized that the issue between Lincoln and Douglas was identical to the issue between Socrates and Thrasymachus,” Harry later said in an interview. “Not similar to it. Identical. It is a question of whether the people make the moral order or the moral order makes the people.”

Certainly for me, reading Harry’s exposition of the debates in Crisis—and I will admit that I was deliberately hooked from the first page, reading deep into the night on a cheap plastic-upholstered sofa—convinced me for the first time that Abraham Lincoln deserved to be taken seriously as a thinker. Not just as a pol, but a thinker. Even more, Crisis offered in Lincoln a rare example of the reconciliation of philosopher and patriot. From the time of Socrates, philosophers have tended not to place their own polis in necessarily high regard; patriots, on the other hand, tend to be guided by a kind of Machiavellian collective self-love the philosopher finds distasteful. Crisis pointed to a reconciliation of the two, with Lincoln as the chief agent of the reconciling. This was, after all, the same Lincoln who eulogized Henry Clay in 1852 in words which were as much a revelation of Lincoln’s own capacity for balancing philosophy and patriotism as they were of Clay’s: “He loved his country partly because it was his own country, but mostly because it was a free country; and he burned with a zeal for its advancement, prosperity and glory, because he saw in such, the advancement, prosperity and glory, of human liberty, human right and human nature.”

This was vitally important to me as a student of American intellectual history, a once-vital subculture of American history-writing in the heyday of Perry Miller, Leo Marx, Murray Murphey, Merle Curti, and Ralph Gabriel that was drowning in the muck of the ‘new social history,’ which had no use for either patriotism or philosophy. What was left of American intellectual history was too often taught and written as a quick transit from the Puritans to Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Transcendentalists, with a quick stop-off for Benjamin Franklin, before arriving at the only “real” American philosopher, William James, and the only “real” American philosophy, pragmatism. This was, in large measure, a Progressive conceit, since pragmatism was actually Progressivism in philosophical dress.

At Penn, Bruce Kuklick had taught me to be suspicious of this convenient genealogy. It was too Bostonian, like trying to write the history of opera in America only from program notes supplied by the Metropolitan Opera. Kuklick threaded me through the by-paths of a more elaborate American philosophical tapestry that included the New Divinity Men, the 19th-century collegiate moral philosophers, and Josiah Royce. In so doing, he made me listen for the other, unsuspected voices of American intellectual life in the 19th century—and so I was perfectly situated, in 1980, to recognize Jaffa’s Lincoln as the newest member of the larger family of American thinkers.

Still Seeking

I got to know Harry Jaffa better over the years, and received many other nocturnal phone summonses, itemizing the shortcoming of this or that publication of mine on Lincoln. (Curiously, Harry never wrote to me—it was always the phone—but I do have one letter from his wife, sent to me soon after we moved to Gettysburg, explaining that she was a descendent of one of the Gettysburg Culps who had given their name to a chief landmark of the Gettysburg battlefield, Culp’s Hill.) Always, his concern was whether I had made enough of the Declaration of Independence, and Lincoln’s love for it.

When I saw him, and talked with him, for the last time, in 2013, he still pressed me. “You must say more about the Declaration!”

I hope I have, and that I have also learned more than a little about Leo Strauss. When that good man and devoted Straussian, Professor Robert Kraynak, invited me to speak at Colgate University in 2012, he hosted a dinner with his students at a local restaurant during which the conversation turned to whether my previous protestations about not being a Straussian still stood. He eventually appealed to the waitress: “Is Professor Guelzo a Straussian?” “Of course,” she replied at once, “everybody knows that!” Harry could not have said it better.

I miss our “Harry of the West” (the accolade bestowed on Lincoln’s “beau ideal of a statesman,” Henry Clay), the centennial of whose birth (October 7, 1918) we recently commemorated. And I hope my stubbornly empirical historians’ mentality did not prove too frustrating to a man who felt no restraint at grouping Aristotle, Thomas Jefferson, and John C. Calhoun in a single paragraph. If I could ask him three questions now, they would be, more-or-less, these:

1. Harry, what about the Constitution? What is its relation to the Declaration? Is it, as Lincoln said, like the picture of silver and the apple of gold? Is it a pro-slavery or an anti-slavery document?
2. Harry, what are the natural rights? Yes, they begin with life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, as Jefferson wrote; but do they include property? And if so, what else?
3. Harry, is America really the exceptional nation? Or will we, like so many past efforts, crumble inevitably into the dust? If so, what becomes of our vaunted formation around the core of natural rights and natural law?

These are my questions; I sit beside the phone, realizing that the answers must come from myself.

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