

VOLUME XXI, NUMBER 4, FALL 2021

CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

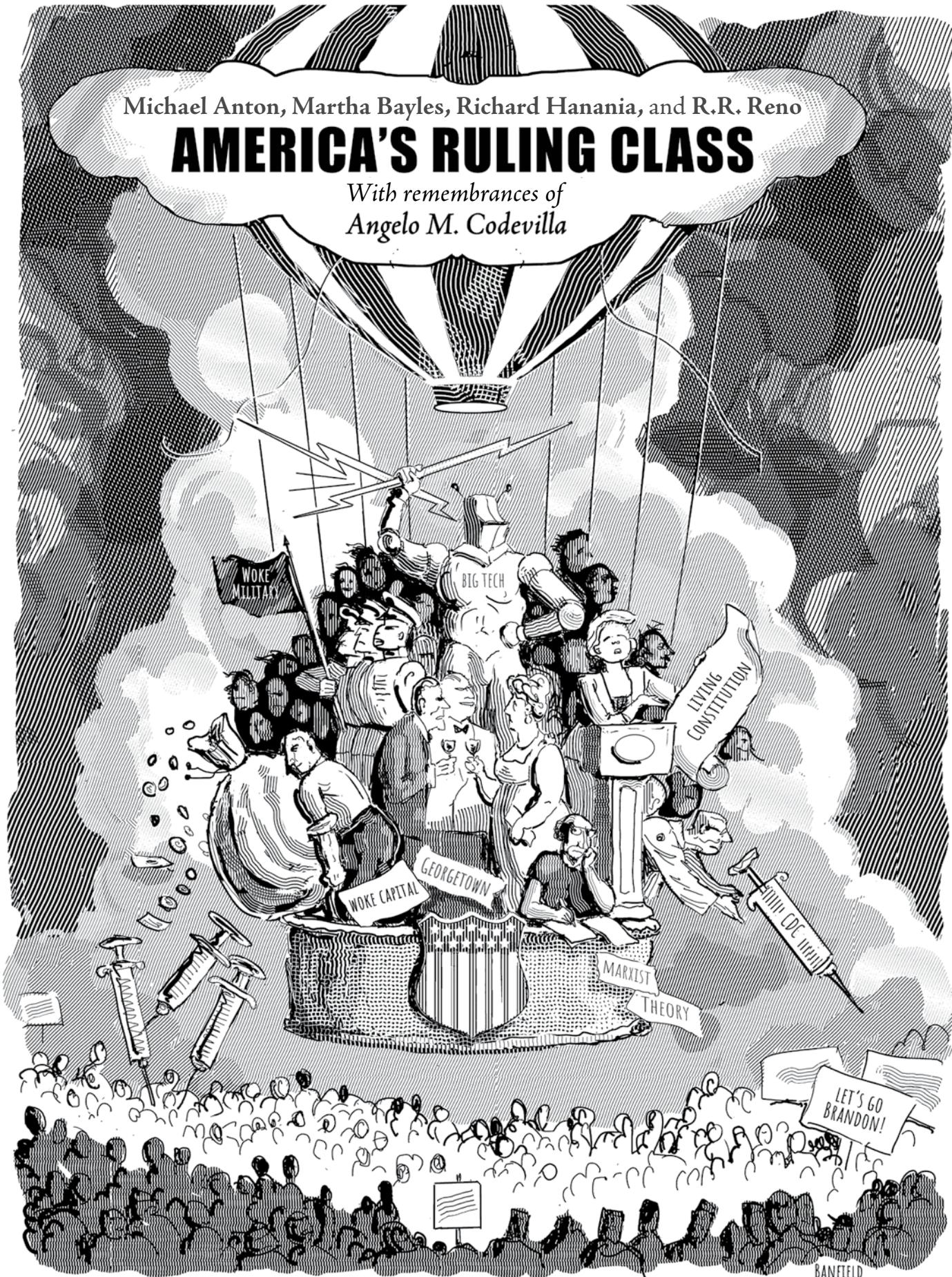
Jeffrey H. Anderson:
How to Win in 2024

Jean M. Yarbrough:
Josh Hawley vs. Big Tech

Victor Davis Hanson:
Allen Guelzo's Robert E. Lee

Vincent J. Cannato
♦
Myron Magnet:
Autumn in New York

Gary Saul Morson:
The Enlightenment



Joseph M. Bessette
♦
John Eastman:
The Memos

Christopher Caldwell:
Civil War in France

David P. Goldman:
China's Art of War

Spencer A. Klavan:
Translating the Gospels

William Voegeli:
America Without Baseball

A Publication of the Claremont Institute

PRICE: \$6.95

IN CANADA: \$9.50

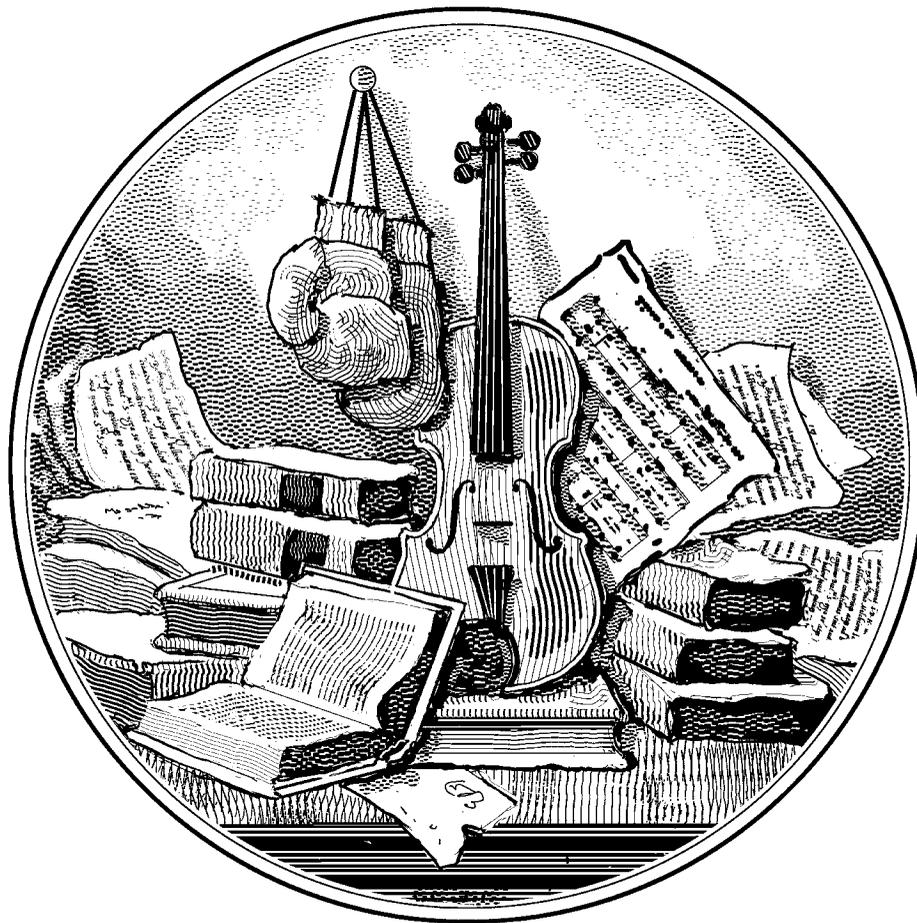


7 25274 57768 2

Book Review by Colleen A. Sheehan

GLADLY DID HE LEARN AND GLADLY TEACH

The Soul of Politics: Harry V. Jaffa and the Fight for America, by Glenn Ellmers.
Encounter Books, 408 pages, \$31.99



GLENN ELMERS HAS PRODUCED THE first book dedicated to the life and thought of Harry V. Jaffa (1918–2015). Given the importance, scope, and complexity of Jaffa's work, no doubt there will be more.

A senior fellow with the Claremont Institute and visiting research scholar at Hillsdale College, Ellmers treats the reader to a brief, delightful biographical précis of the boxer-violinist turned political philosopher from Long Island. He tells the story of the fateful day Jaffa visited his teacher Leo Strauss without his usual violin in tow, at which Strauss smiled knowingly, "as if to say that, in the struggle between music and political philosophy, 'I won.'" (In the version Jaffa told me, Strauss actually said out loud, triumphantly, "I won!")

Although the stories Ellmers includes about Jaffa's life are delightful, the focus of *The Soul of Politics: Harry V. Jaffa and the Fight for America* is primarily on Jaffa's ideas, including the arguments highlighted in sundry dialogues and disputes with wary interlocutors. One

could say that Ellmers gives us the Apology of Harry Jaffa. But in contrast to the indictment of Socrates for bringing new gods into the city and corrupting the youth, Jaffa's critics accuse him of taking God and morality too seriously and making the youth—patriots!

FOLLOWING INTRODUCTORY AND BIOGRAPHICAL chapters, Ellmers devotes a chapter to Lincoln, one to both Aristotle and Shakespeare, then, skipping a chapter, one to both Lincoln and Churchill. The final three chapters concern Jaffa's quarrels with fellow conservatives and Straussians, Jaffa's legacy, and a postscript on the divided mind. The central chapter is devoted to "Reason, Revelation, and the Theological-Political Problem."

Ellmers's chief concern in the Lincoln and Aristotle portions of the book is Jaffa's understanding of the changeability of natural right. Jaffa follows Aristotle in seeing political right as contingent on circumstances that vary from time to time and place to place. Because natu-

ral right is part of political right, the latter too is changeable. But, if the human soul is unvarying, natural right is not simply derivative of political right. As such, a dichotomy between ancients and moderns may be useful for understanding the history of political philosophy, though it is not an accurate lens through which to view politics and statesmanship. Practical activity cannot be determined by abstract considerations alone; it requires the direction of *phronesis*, or prudence. Just as Strauss taught his students to treat politics philosophically, he also taught the importance of the political treatment of philosophy. Jaffa learned this lesson better than any of Strauss's students.

Though concern for his own country and fellow citizens led Jaffa to a deeper understanding of philosophy, his love of country was not subsumed in his love of the philosophic life. Rather, he always measured his patriotism against an understanding of what *deserves* to be loved. One could well say of Jaffa what Lincoln said of Henry Clay:

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.

On Clay's (and Lincoln's) brand of patriotism, Jaffa once remarked: "Love of human liberty, human right, and human nature encompasses love of one's own with love of the good."

THE CENTRAL CHAPTER ON THE THEOLOGICAL-political problem constitutes the book's most sustained and philosophical analysis of Jaffa's thought. According to Ellmers, Jaffa's change of mind about the character of the American Founding and the judgment it merits, as manifest in the different interpretations in *Crisis of the House Divided* (1959) and *A New Birth of Freedom* (2000), occurred as a result of his discovery of the United States "as a kind of theological and political culmination of Western civilization." According to Jaffa, the advent of Judeo-Christian monotheism posed a new challenge to political obligation, forever changing the face of the Western world and requiring a wholly new political solution.

The philosopher who best showed the problem of political obligation in the Christian West was Shakespeare; the philosopher who showed the way to solve the problem of political obligation was John Locke (and, to some extent before him, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas). Jaffa presented Locke as the American Founders understood him rather than as a clandestine follower of Thomas Hobbes. By declaring human conscience beyond the reach of political authority, Locke paved the way for the separation of church and state and the establishment of limited government, thereby attenuating the rivalry between, and enabling the healthy co-existence of, politics and religion—Athens and Jerusalem.

The United States established in practice the solution Locke had set forth in theory. The Declaration of Independence's appeal to the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God indicates respect for both reason and revelation, just as the standard of Nature sets human equality and enlightened consent as the grounds for political obligation in the modern world.

Jaffa fought to remind Americans of this legacy. Our forgetfulness of the Declaration's great truths—a forgetfulness that extends in various ways across the West—is at the root of our present crisis, our inability to know and defend what is good and great in our heritage. This crisis is so advanced that many have lost hope in our civilization. The decline and fall of America and the West means the abolition

of freedom and the death of man as we have known him; it portends the end of intentional human life as understood within an ordered, moral universe. Gone will be the dreams of Prospero and the last best hope of Lincoln, and in their place will come the suicidal boredom—if not murderous rage—of Friedrich Nietzsche's "last man."

JAFFA CLEARLY IDENTIFIED THIS THREAT but never lost hope for America's future and for the perpetuation of the civilization rooted in Athens and Jerusalem. Even the worst corruption of humanity cannot destroy the essential freedom of the human mind. Jaffa often emphasized Thomas Jefferson's understanding of the "metaphysical freedom of the mind" as "the ground of all moral freedom," and so the root of all religious and civil liberty. Coming to know the essential freedom of the mind is not only the scholar's chore, but the task of the statesman and good citizen as well.

Ellmers is at his finest in tackling Jaffa's understanding of the inexplicable freedom of the human mind and the miraculous power of the human soul. His presentation of Jaffa's "extemporaneous 'rundown'" in response to a question from the audience at Rosary College in 1980, about how human beings "know" anything, is deftly handled, illustrating the scope of philosophic inquiry and sheer brilliance of the mind of Harry Jaffa. The terse discussion about whether God is bound by his own moral edicts is yet another example of the incisiveness of Jaffa's thought.

Immediately following the ethereal subject of the miracle and mystery of the human soul, Ellmers puts Jaffa right back in the earthy fight and, as was his wont, not holding any punches. A host of quarrels are alluded to here, providing more of a general overview rather than critical analysis. Included in this lineup of disputants are Thomas Pangle, Garry Wills, Willmoore Kendall, Walter Berns, Allan Bloom, Mel Bradford, Martin Diamond, Russell Kirk, Irving Kristol, Joseph Hough, Joseph Sobran, Joseph Cropsey, Harvey Mansfield, Robert Bork, and Antonin Scalia. It should be noted that many of those whom Jaffa engaged agreed with him about the deterioration of America and the West, even if their diagnoses were not the same, or their prescriptions. Moreover, not all—perhaps not any—of these interlocutors were Jaffa's *enemies*; in fact, many were friends. As William F. Buckley once remarked, "If you think Harry Jaffa is hard to argue with, try agreeing with him."

The abiding human questions and political challenges that occupied Jaffa's life's work continue to demand the attention of thoughtful people today, including Ellmers. "I am writing to you, spirited moral gentlemen, America's

natural *aristoi*," Ellmers writes in the preface to *The Soul of Politics*, "because the crisis of our country is also the crisis of Western civilization, of civilization itself."

Unlike Jaffa, however, Ellmers addresses his work to men only—neglecting the fact that women today constitute half the citizenry of Western nations. But if natural right is changeable in the way that Aristotle and Jaffa claimed, and Ellmers seemingly accepts, then here is a good case to apply that understanding. In addressing the book to women as well as men, and indeed acknowledging the primacy of the principle of equality in the modern Western world, including equality between the sexes, Ellmers would have demonstrated a better awareness of the changeability of natural right, not to mention a tad more prudence. By contrast, whether in his writings, in the classroom, or in informal dialogue, Jaffa did not direct his teachings to young men only. He simply treated all serious students seriously.

ELLMERS MIGHT ALSO RECONSIDER HIS references to the "Claremont camp," which could be interpreted to mean a particular political disposition rather than a political philosophic enterprise. Like Strauss, Jaffa never encouraged his students to toe a party line. There may be agreement among the students of Jaffa on many matters, not least in their appreciation for things noble and just and their deep regard for American exceptionalism. Indeed, the kind of friendship that abounds among the still growing members of the Claremont family (Jaffa called the students of his students his "intellectual grandchildren") is of the most treasured kind, taking its bearings in a shared love for things worth loving.

Harry Jaffa once remarked, impromptu, that "[George] Washington was a perfectly public-spirited man before there was any public to be spirited about." One is tempted to say that Jaffa continued a perfectly public-spirited man when there hardly remained any public to be spirited about. His brand of patriotism revealed his understanding of the conditions of freedom and the courage of commitment required of its citizens, its leaders, and the teachers of its leaders and citizens. Those who made the pilgrimage west to study with Jaffa at a little oasis in the desert, whose lives were forever changed by their association with the pugilist (and former violinist) from Long Island, with the piercing wit and mischievous grin, know how fortunate they are to be part of that happy few, that band of brothers and sisters, whose lives crossed paths with greatness.

Colleen A. Sheehan is professor and director of Graduate Studies in the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership at Arizona State University.

The CLAREMONT REVIEW OF BOOKS is a publication of the CLAREMONT INSTITUTE
FOR THE STUDY OF STATESMANSHIP AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY.

Subscribe to
the *Claremont Review of Books*

“The Claremont Review of Books is full of splendid essays and reviews—well written, based on deep scholarly knowledge, raising issues of lasting importance. I read it cover to cover, which takes some time, because there’s a lot of thought-provoking content.”

—Michael Barone

Subscribe to the *CRB* today and save 25%
off the newstand price. A one-year
subscription is only \$19.95.

To begin receiving America’s premier
conservative book review, visit
claremontreviewofbooks.com
or call (909) 981 2200.

CLAREMONT
REVIEW OF BOOKS

1317 W. FOOTHILL
BLVD, SUITE 120,
UPLAND, CA
91786

NON PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
PERMIT NO. 504
UPLAND, CA