

Eulogy delivered at Harry V. Jaffa's Funeral January 15, 2015

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I am glad that others are talking about Jaffa the man. For me, the main thing was always Jaffa the writer and thinker. Jaffa was always completely generous to me and my family. But the thing I am most grateful for is nothing personal. It was his brilliant interpretation of America and his analysis of the problem of the best political order.

Jaffa's intellectual point of departure was his encounter with Leo Strauss. I believe that in Jaffa's mind, that was the most important thing that ever happened to him, with the exception of his marriage and family.

Strauss taught Jaffa two big things:

First, political philosophy is possible. Contrary to the almost universal opinion of that day, there is a rational case for natural right—the idea that there is such a thing as justice that is true for all men and all time. Strauss convinced Jaffa that the best case for natural right is found in the classical philosophers. Thus his lifelong interest in Plato and Aristotle.

Second, Strauss convinced Jaffa that the founding was defective. I'll exaggerate for the sake of clarity by summarizing Strauss in this way: The founding was based on Locke; Locke was a follower of Hobbes; Hobbes followed Machiavelli; and Machiavelli grounded politics on low self-interest.

But Strauss left Jaffa with a problem: If the classics are the standard for us today, and if America was based on a rejection of the classics, then is there any way America can be defended?

Jaffa's good friend Harry Neumann used the term "pre-Jaffa Jaffa" to characterize Jaffa's scholarship up to 1975. Like other Straussians, Jaffa at first tried to defend America by looking for something in the regime that ennobled its supposedly base beginnings. Harvey Mansfield thought he had found it in the U.S. Constitution, which in his view rescued America from the dangerous half-truth of equality in the Declaration of Independence. The pre-Jaffa Jaffa also found the ennobling of America in something outside the Declaration. In *Crisis of the House Divided*, Lincoln was the statesman who transformed Jefferson's Lockean "enlightened self-interest" into a lofty moral goal.

Some time around 1975 Jaffa as it were became Jaffa. His long rethinking of the founding took place in three stages.

The first stage was exemplified by *How to Think about the American Revolution* (1978). Various



conservative intellectuals—Irving Kristol, Kendall, Carey, and Bradford—had denied that the founding was based on Lockean natural rights. Martin Diamond had claimed that the Declaration of Independence provides almost no guidance regarding the structure of government. Jaffa easily proved that these men were wrong. More important, Jaffa showed how the founding principles of equality and liberty were, if understood as the founders and Lincoln did, *conservative* principles. He meant that these principles once were, and could again become, the basis of a good society. Jaffa’s revised approach meant that he no longer needed Lincoln to vindicate America. The founding could be defended on its own terms.

If you have seen some of the Jaffa obituaries written by conservatives, such as Yuval Levin’s and Richard Brookhiser’s on *National Review*, or Harvey Mansfield’s at the *Weekly Standard*, you will notice that Jaffa’s *Crisis* is always highly praised, while his post-1975 writings are either not mentioned at all or are passed by with minimal remark. That is because most conservatives, to say nothing of liberals, do not like the political theory of the founding.

The second stage of Jaffa’s reassessment of the founding occurred in Reagan years, when liberal attacks on the family and on Christianity grew more and more strident. Jaffa became increasingly interested in fact that the Founders were pro-morality, pro-religion, and pro-heterosexual marriage. Some scholars have argued that that means the founding was an incoherent amalgam of non-Lockean moral and religious traditions with Lockean natural rights. Jaffa said no: the founders’ understanding was perfectly coherent. Without citizen virtue, they asserted, government cannot secure the people’s natural rights. Some of Jaffa’s writings from this period appear in his 1984 book *American Conservatism and the American Founding*.

For conservative intellectuals like Allan Bloom and Robert Bork, the principles of the founding were a time bomb unknowingly planted in our regime by the founders. Their principles were ultimately destructive of everything good and decent in America. The radicals of the 1960s, Bloom wrote, “absolutized and radicalized [the ideas of] [[e]quality [and] freedom . . . [that] were inherent in our regime” (*Closing* 326). Jaffa was able to refute that claim because he had rediscovered the moral dimension of the natural rights doctrine.

The third and final stage of Jaffa’s understanding was reached in the late 80s. Not only is the founding defensible; not only is it moral; now it is the founding itself which is the standard of noble politics in the modern world. The turning-point article appeared in *Interpretation* in 1987: “Equality, Liberty, Wisdom, Morality and Consent in the Idea of Political Freedom.” The full expression of Jaffa’s mature understanding of America (and not merely of Lincoln) appears in what I regard as his most insightful book, *A New Birth of Freedom* (2000).

Not only is the American regime not opposed to the classical understanding of politics. It is even *required* by it—in the conditions of the modern world. Jaffa argued that the classical political teaching of Aristotle had to be modified after the rise of Christianity, because the new religion had severed the old connection between the city and its gods. In a world dominated by a universalistic religion, a new ground for political obligation had to be found that was not tied to



religious authority. That was the law of nature and nature's God.

The founders' doctrine of toleration eliminates salvation of the soul as an end of politics. Paradoxically, political life is thereby elevated, by removing from it a leading source of its degradation, namely, persecution arising from conviction of one's own sanctity. The Founders' doctrine also elevates politics by announcing a sacred cause, the cause of liberty, which elicits the noble virtues of statesmanship and citizenship. The social compact theory challenges men to live up to its moral demands, which require concern for others (respecting their rights) and self-restraint (the virtues of parents and citizens).

Those who complain that the Founders reduce life to mere preservation neglect what the Founders actually say. The purpose of politics, as the Declaration says, is "safety and happiness." These, Jaffa writes in *New Birth*, "are the alpha and omega of political life." That is, "liberty and property come to sight as means to the preservation of life, but their enduring worth is in the service, not of mere life, but of the good or happy life. . . . [I]t is the natural order of these wants, directed toward their corresponding natural ends, that constitute the architectonic principles of a society arising out of compact, properly understood" (50).

Here Jaffa brings the political theory of the founding back around to the classical concern with philosophy as the best life. The soul of a true American has a higher destiny than mere preservation or acquisition, although there is a place in America for these too.

Speaking for myself and for the many others who have learned so much from this man, let me conclude by saying: Thank you, Harry.