# A Strauss Divided

**Review of 'Patriotism Is Not Enough' by Steven F. Hayward**

## By Tod Lindberg

Steven F. Hayward's *Patriotism Is Not Enough* is a loose intellectual portrait of the life and thought of Harry V. Jaffa and his circle of close friends and even closer enemies. Jaffa, who died two years ago at the age of 96, was a prominent student of Leo Strauss's who held forth and shaped a generation of students of his own at Claremont McKenna College and its associated graduate school and institute in California. Jaffa was the author, most famously, of the classic study of Abraham Lincoln, *Crisis of the House Divided*, a book that sought to establish Lincoln not only as a statesman of the first rank but also as a profound political thinker in his own right.

Jaffa was also among the most quarrelsome men of letters ever to reside in the groves of academe, and it is this fact that gave Hayward's book its impetus and provides its propulsion throughout. Hayward begins with a juxtaposition of Jaffa and Walter Berns, another prominent student of Strauss's, with whom Jaffa quarreled incessantly throughout their adult lives. Jaffa and Berns, born six months apart, died on the very same day in 2015. This quirk of mortality set Hayward, a tremendous admirer of both men, on his way, and it informs the book's personal style, which will painlessly acquaint newcomers with some pivotal moments and issues in recent intellectual history, even as it keeps those who already know the subject entertained.

Jaffa had a uniquely high regard for the American "regime" (if we may indulge the vocabulary of the Straussian school). And it was Lincoln, in Jaffa's view, who played the pivotal role in its true establishment. The framers of the U.S. Constitution had done admirable work. But coping as they had to with a grave political problem—how to create a union of both slaveholding states and states where the practice was forbidden—they lost their grip on what Jaffa takes as the true founding document of the United States: the Declaration of Independence. In dissolving their ties with England and establishing a nation of their own, the Americans claimed they were acting in accordance with "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God": "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

For Jaffa, this evocation of the claims of natural right and natural law was the essence of the American project. The reason is their "self-evident" truth. Natural law is not just one way of looking at things. According to Jaffa, it's the truth about everything, including human nature and politics. The institution of slavery was an affront to the equality of human beings and their right to life, liberty, and the fruit of their own endeavors. The Constitution, in tolerating the continuation of slavery, accordingly failed to fulfill the promise of the Declaration. It took a Civil War to make good on that promise. And it took a philosopher-statesman of the first rank to understand the challenge, set a corrective course in motion, and shepherd it through extraordinary difficulty to completion. It took Lincoln.

The Gettysburg Address, in Jaffa's view, provides the definitive summation of Lincoln's statesmanship. In evoking a nation "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal," Lincoln reached back to the Declaration. "Four score and seven years ago" refers not to the 1789 Constitution but to 1776, the moment "our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation." The Civil War was the test "of whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, could long endure." Lincoln set his

purpose, in the name of the Union dead, on "a new birth of freedom" for the United States and its government of, by, and for the people—a freedom that would never perish.

In Jaffa's view, Lincoln's re-founding of the United States was in full accordance with the requirements of natural law. So it was that Jaffa concluded that the United States was, quite simply, the best possible regime. Forget about rule by philosopher-kings, or the rejection of the very idea that any regime is "best." Forget about the critique of equality as a leveling of the possibility of human attainment, raising up the low but cutting the great down to size (classical liberalism's "low but sturdy foundation," as many philosophers have seen it). What we have in the post-–Civil War United States is the best as such—or rather, that's what we would have had if Lincoln had lived on to complete his project of political equality and equal rights for all. With his assassination in April 1865, it would take a hundred years to overcome Jim Crow.

Now, perhaps you embrace the "low but sturdy foundation" view of the politics of modernity—as having achieved much but, thinking of Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar, only at the cost of certain types of high political achievement. Or perhaps you think that the United States is a great country, even an exceptional country—or, as I do, that the United States was the first and remains the preeminent instantiation of the classical liberalism of modernity. But suppose you would balk at the notion of the United States as the *best possible* regime or the claim to the "self-evident" truth of "natural right" as the basis for this judgment. Maybe "balk" is too strong: Suppose you were willing to "entertain a doubt" on either score.

Then, assuming he thought you were worth his time, you would have been well- positioned for a lifelong quarrel with Harry V. Jaffa. As Hayward notes, this was first of all a family feud among former students of Leo Strauss, who died in 1973. Jaffa was in command of the "West Coast Straussians" gathered around Claremont. His antagonists were the more diffuse group of "East Coast Straussians," including such figures as Berns, Allan Bloom, and Harvey C. Mansfield Jr.[1] It was largely the person and thought of Jaffa that constituted the rift. To put the matter baldly, the West Coast Straussians suspected their East Coast brethren of relativism or nihilism because of the latter's doubts about natural law as the ground of all philosophical truth. The East Coast Straussians, meanwhile, thought the West Coast view of natural law bordered on religious conviction and was, in any event, more suited to *engagé* intellectual life than philosophizing.

The reason "patriotism is not enough," as Jaffa liked to say, is that attachment to one's country is appropriate to any citizen of any country (even if no serious person should offer such affection unconditionally or uncritically, contra the love of a parent for a small child). If, to the contrary, and after great reflection on the question, one concludes that one is a citizen of the *best possible* regime, then the proper affection due it is uniquely great, and the withholding of such affection is an injustice not only to the country but also to reason itself.

This is the substance of Jaffa's contentiousness. What looks at times like a quarrel over minutiae among individuals who would agree on 99 percent of the answers to all questions—as does the lifelong antagonism between Jaffa and Berns—on closer inspection turns entirely on the importance each attaches to the remaining 1 percent. To Jaffa, that 1 percent was *the* question. His opponents didn't take it seriously, and they came to wonder what had become of the towering intellect behind *Crisis of the House Divided*.

That Jaffa tended toward the *engagé* life is not in doubt. He wrote speeches for Barry Goldwater, including the most notorious lines of the 1964 GOP presidential candidate's acceptance speech: "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. . . . [M]oderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue." Forty years later, he was sharply critical of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia's "originalism" for its reading of the Constitution without reference to the Declaration. Jaffa was instead an admirer of Justice Clarence Thomas's body of work

on the Court, developed mostly in dissent or concurrence, which draws freely and thoughtfully on the Declaration and natural right.

Jaffa, it need hardly be said, bemoaned the general intellectual tenor of his times. Hayward quotes a characteristic passage: "The free constitutional regimes of the West are . . . being drawn inexorably toward unfreedom by the most powerful intellectual force in their midst," namely, "the conviction that there is no human nature properly so called." In his view that the West was in trouble, he was hardly alone, among Straussians or conservatives more broadly. In his diagnosis of the problem as a loss of conviction in the truth of natural law, he was unapologetically extreme.

Hayward quotes a number of the better lines of Jaffa's feud-mates. Mansfield once drily observed that Jaffa had "an excess of fighting spirit." Berns, in a 1981 private letter to Jaffa, berated him for frittering away his intellectual gifts on endless quarrels: "In the current atmosphere of this country, you could have become the great historian and poet of the American regime. Are you pleased with what you have done instead?" But the rebuke itself recapitulates the problem: Jaffa saw himself not as a "poet of the American regime" but as a philosopher who knew the truth about the American regime and would insist upon it whenever challenged. As Hayward rightly notes, "A less combative Jaffa wouldn't have been Jaffa."

I met Jaffa once in the late 1990s when I was invited to participate in a Claremont Institute panel discussion on his legacy. I began my remarks with my surprise at my inclusion, especially since I had studied with Jaffa's great rival Allan Bloom. But then I noted cheekily that I had not been an especially good student of Bloom's, and perhaps in anticipation of a failure to give a good account of myself on the panel, the Claremont Institute reasoned that I would thereby bring discredit upon Bloom—a dark ulterior motive. I went on to praise *Crisis of the House Divided* as the towering work it is, and concluded by speaking of Jaffa with the words of the final lines of Tennyson's "Ulysses":

> . . . tho'
>
> We are not now that strength which in old days
>
> Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
>
> One equal temper of heroic hearts,
>
> Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
>
> To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

In short, praise of a man of action. Jaffa was smiling as we shook hands afterward. But he was not smiling at me, I think. It was the inward smile of a man sharpening his knives for a rebuttal.

1 I was a student of Bloom's, and Mansfield was a cherished Hoover Institution colleague on a now-defunct task force examining the relation of virtue and freedom, the origin of my book *The Heroic Heart*.

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