

HARRY V. JAFFA

In Memoriam—1918–2015

Harry V. Jaffa was one of the great teachers of political philosophy who inspired a generation of students in the field of American political thought. He was a brilliant and combative scholar whose life work was to develop an American application of Leo Strauss's revival of natural-right philosophy against the relativism and nihilism of our times.

Jaffa's original contribution to Strauss's scholarship was to claim that the Declaration of Independence, as understood by the American founders and applied by Abraham Lincoln, was the best and noblest expression of natural right in the modern world. In two influential books, *Crisis of the House Divided* and *A New Birth of Freedom*, Jaffa explained Lincoln's statesmanship in the battle over slavery as the prudent defense of modern natural-rights principles that elevated them to the status of magnanimity and justice. In Jaffa's eloquent interpretation, the greatness of Lincoln was his mission to re-found the American republic on the universal and timeless truths of the Declaration of Independence and thereby vindicate the dignity of man as a rational animal. His teaching captivated many students by providing a philosophic basis for Lincoln's view of America as "the last, best hope of earth."

In his collected body of writings, Jaffa connected his defense of Lincoln and the American founders to the quest for moral order in the entire Western tradition consisting of Socratic philosophy, biblical revelation, modern natural rights, and even Shakespearean literature. Jaffa's passion for moral order led him to forge a creative synthesis of all these strands—a synthesis of "Athens, Jerusalem, and Peoria"—that was as controversial as it was bold and original. It inevitably provoked critics and detractors, as well as defenders and disciples, stimulating friends and foes alike to engage in highly charged polemical exchanges and grand philosophical debates. The result was a long-running dispute among students of Strauss, widely known as "West Coast" vs. "East Coast" Straussians which was documented by Jaffa himself in his last book, *Crisis of the Strauss Divided*. Among his longtime friends and colleagues, Walter Berns was a vocal critic, who also died as if providentially on the very same day as Harry Jaffa. In remembering both remarkable teachers and scholars, I can think of no more fitting tribute than to recall the words of Lincoln in his *Lyceum Address*: "They were the pillars of the temple of liberty" who were finally leveled after ninety years "by the silent artillery of time."

—Robert P. Kraynak
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