
FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

HARRY V. JAFFA AT 100

by Charles R. Kesler

HARRY JAFFA WAS PUGNACIOUS, A WORD (HE WOULD BE HAPPY to tell you) that comes from the Latin *pugnus*, "fist." A Golden Gloves boxer in his youth, he never lost his love of a good fight, whether in the ring, the seminar, or the public square. To the people, and they were many over the years, who tried to dance away from his public criticisms he liked to apply Joe Louis's defiant quip, "You can run but you can't hide!"

As quick as his historical footwork and as sharp as his dialectical jabs could be, they didn't exhaust his game. In southern California, where he taught at Claremont McKenna College and Claremont Graduate University for almost 50 years, he took up long-distance, competitive cycling, a sport that involves going round and round the same track, racing against your personal best as well as against your competitors. Harry played this long game, too, retracing and perfecting his arguments in his spirited effort to revive political philosophy and reform American conservatism. "The fate of the West depends on the fate of America," he liked to say. "The fate of America depends on the fate of the Republican Party. And the fate of the Republican Party depends on the fate of the conservative movement." Which in turn depended on *him*.

That was a boast, but not an empty one. Among other things, he helped to inspire the creation of the Claremont Institute, which gave birth to this magazine, as well as to the Publius, Lincoln, and John Marshall fellowship programs, educating the brightest young conservatives for almost 40 years.

His parents gave him the middle name "Victor" in anticipatory celebration (he was born on October 7, 1918) of the Allies' victory in World War I. Jaffa would have little patience for today's worries over micro-aggressions, with their attendant, coddling calls for trigger warnings. His aggressions were decidedly macro. He fought over large issues and high principles, at least most of the time, though he occasionally reminded me of the Irishman in the joke—consider that your trigger warning—who wandered into a bar where a bloody good brawl was going on. Eagerly the Irishman asked the bartender, "Is this a private fight, or may anyone join in?"

Harry got into more fights than he needed to, strictly speaking, though it was rare not to learn something important from them. The tone of the later ones often disappointed, as for example in the exchanges with Robert Bork or with his old friend Walter Berns, analyzed by Steve Hayward

last year in his impressive book, *Patriotism Is Not Enough*. Richard Samulson summed up those clashes as "Harry fiddles while Walter burns."

YET MOST OF HARRY'S DEBATES ILLUMINATE AND WILL ENDURE. His arguments taught us things we needed to know and could hardly have learned anywhere else, certainly not as bracingly. Above all is this true of his two great works on Abraham Lincoln, written 40 years apart, yet each at the center of the debate over how to understand, and conserve, our country. *Crisis of the House Divided* (1959) examined Lincoln's magnanimity, his character as a great-souled hero who saved American democracy while also, in a way, transcending it. *A New Birth of Freedom* (2000) shifted the emphasis to the American Founding, which didn't need to be transcended because its principles were already high-minded. Lincoln's genius complemented but didn't need to correct those principles, Jaffa now concluded.

His first book, *Thomism and Aristotelianism* ("T & A," as he liked to refer to it, archly), published in 1952, devoted careful attention to three moral virtues—courage, justice, and magnanimity—the ones closest to Harry's own heart. His purpose was to disentangle reason from revelation, to separate Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* from Thomas Aquinas's commentary on it. Late in life, asked if he would write the book the same way again, Harry said he wouldn't. Then, he explained, he'd understood Aquinas to be trying to make Aristotle safe for Christianity. Now, he realized, Thomas had been trying to make Christianity safe for, i.e., compatible with, Aristotle.

In many ways, Jaffa himself remained a kind of medieval, working within the revealed law of his faith or dispensation rather than challenging it from outside. What the Torah was to Maimonides, or the Old and New Testament to Aquinas, the Declaration of Independence was, *mutatis mutandis*, to Jaffa: an authoritative framework of divine and natural law by which human beings could take guidance. He worked within that dispensation to articulate and accentuate its inherent justice, moderation, and wisdom.

Anyone who seeks to honor this great American on the hundredth anniversary of his birth should keep in mind, however, Bill Buckley's famous admonition: "If you think it's hard to argue with Harry Jaffa, try agreeing with him."

Claremont Review of Books, Volume XVIII, Number 4, Fall 2018. (Printed in the United States on November 2, 2018.)

Published quarterly by the Claremont Institute for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy, 1317 W. Foothill Blvd, Suite 120, Upland, CA 91786. Telephone: (909) 981-2200. Fax: (909) 981-1616. Postmaster send address changes to Claremont Review of Books Address Change, 1317 W. Foothill Blvd, Suite 120, Upland, CA 91786. Unsolicited manuscripts must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope; or may be sent via email to: crbeditor@claremont.org.

Send all letters to the editor to the above addresses.

Editor: Charles R. Kesler

Senior Editors:

Christopher Flannery, William Voegeli

Managing Editor: John B. Kienker

Production Editor: Patrick Collins

Assistant Editor: Lindsay Eberhardt

Editorial Assistant: Alex Sanchez-Olvera

Contributing Editor: Joseph Tartakovsky

Art Director: Elliott Banfield

Publisher: Ryan P. Williams

Publisher (2000–2001): Thomas B. Silver

Price: \$6.95 per copy; \$27.80 for a one-year subscription; \$55.60 for a two-year subscription; \$83.40 for a three-year subscription. Add \$17 for all foreign subscriptions, including those originating in Canada and Latin America. To subscribe, call (909) 981-2200, or contact subscriptions@claremont.org.

Visit us online at www.claremont.org/crb. Opinions expressed in signed articles do not necessarily represent the views of the editors, the Claremont Institute, or its board of directors. Nothing in this journal is an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill or influence the election of any candidate. All contents Copyright © 2018 the Claremont Institute, except where otherwise noted.