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Jaffa, Harry V. (1918—)

Harry V. Jaffa was a student of the political philosopher Leo Strauss. The principal theme of Strauss' work was "the crisis of the West," a crisis precipitated by modernity's rejection of natural right. Jaffa extended Strauss' analysis to America, devoting the bulk of his productive scholarly career to uncovering and articulating the natural right principles of the American founding, particularly as those principles are expressed in the Declaration of Independence. For Jaffa, the "crisis of the West" and the "crisis of America" are identical. Even his first book, *Thomism and Aristotelianism* (1952), an analysis of Aquinas's interpretation of natural right in Aristotle, seems to have been merely prelude to his study of the American founding.

Jaffa's best known book is *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (1959). In this seminal study, Jaffa argued that Abraham Lincoln had in some sense refounded the American regime by rejecting the radically modern Lockean principles of the Founders and grounding the new political regime in Aristotelian natural right. Jaffa argued that Lincoln had thus provided a crucial moral dimension that was missing from the Declaration. In *Crisis*, Jaffa's reading of Locke followed Strauss' revelation that Locke was a thoroughgoing modern who was barely distinguishable from Hobbes. Strauss, of course, discovered the radically modern Locke buried deep in his esoteric message. In the years after *Crisis*, Jaffa came to realize that the Founders could not have read Locke the way Strauss did—indeed there is no evidence that *anyone* ever read Locke with the care and penetration that Strauss did. Thus, if we are to understand the Founders as they understood themselves, it is necessary to read them in the light of the exoteric Locke, not the esoteric Locke revealed by Strauss. And it was through their understanding of the exoteric Locke that the Founders understood the law of nature in a perfectly Aristotelian sense.

In his most recent book, *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War* (2000), Jaffa sees a greater theoretical unity in the American Founding than he did in *Crisis*. Those "classical" elements that Jaffa once attributed exclusively to Lincoln's "refounding" are now seen as elements intrinsic to the Founding itself, a founding that Lincoln "perpetuated" and extended but without changing its essential character. According to Jaffa, what guided the Founders and introduced an Aristotelian element into the regime was prudence: the Declaration embodies an "Aristotelian emphasis on the dictates of prudence." The Declaration, Jaffa argues, "is both teleological and prudential. It is teleological because it is oriented . . . toward the end of human happiness, which according to Aristotle is the ultimate end of human action, whether individual or political. It is prudential because it measures the goodness of human actions, whether individual or political, by their consequences. The consequences, in turn, are judged by whether they advance or retard happiness."

Jaffa, more than any other student of Strauss, understands political philosophy's primary concern with what Strauss called the "theological-political" problem. Jaffa argues that the egalitarian natural right of the Founding is the only form of natural right that

is compatible with Christianity. The principle that “all men are created equal” thus provided the Founders with the only possible access to nature or natural right available in the modern world. “The doctrine of natural law and natural rights enshrined in the Declaration,” Jaffa writes, “is a doctrine of natural *and* divine right.” The Founders thus were able to resolve—at least on a political level—the theological-political problem that arises from the competing claims made by reason and revelation. The American Founding did this by recognizing equally the claims of both. This resolution was made possible, in large part, because the “Lockeanized” ministers of the Founding era understood the separation of church and state as no less a dictate of New Testament theology than reason and natural right.

Jaffa’s scholarship has been controversial because of his conviction—following Aristotle—that truth is more important than friends. Jaffa has been a severe critic of fellow conservatives—and fellow “Straussians”—and many of his tracts are highly polemical, even though always dialectical. He argues that contemporary conservatism has fallen into the same kind of nihilism that animates liberalism. Both liberalism and conservatism reject natural right as the ground of politics and constitutional government. According to Jaffa, the crisis of America has forced us to choose between nihilism and natural right. Jaffa is strident in his critique of nihilism and its supporters, both those who are aware of their nihilism and those who are not.

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Further Reading

Jaffa, Harry V. *American Conservatism and the American Founding*. Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1984.

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Silver, Thomas B., and Peter W. Schramm, eds. *Natural Right and Political Right: Essays in Honor of Harry V. Jaffa*. Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1984.

See also: Bradford, M.E.; Claremont Institute; Declaration of Independence; Jefferson, Thomas; Lincoln, Abraham; Strauss, Leo; Straussianism