

# Between Nature and History

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**E**IGHTY-ONE YEARS AGO, A diminutive German Jew named Leo Strauss fled the rise of fascism in Germany, took a series of academic positions in the United States, and changed the landscape of American political philosophy forever. Not only was Strauss himself uber-influential, but he surrounded himself with a number of disciples who themselves became academics and trained more students in “Straussian” ideas and methods. Thus was created an extended “family”—now in its fifth generations—of Straussian political theorists.

There has been plenty written about Leo Strauss and plenty written about the Straussians as a group, but what has been lacking are examinations of individual students of Strauss and their contributions to political theory. Steven Hayward helps fill that void by plucking two major figures from the Straussian family tree—Harry Jaffa and Walter Berns—and presenting their ideas in an interesting and lively way.

But even though Hayward has written a fine book, he hasn’t written the book indicated by the title. Let’s start with “Patriotism is Not Enough.” The theme of patriotism only shows up intermittently and, when it does, there is no indication of its inadequacies or insufficiency. The book has

less to do with patriotism, and more to do with the common and enduring Straussian themes that were also central to Jaffa and Berns: confronting the political problems of modernity and the quest to ground right in nature rather than in history.

Both Jaffa and Berns studied directly with Strauss and shared with their master a view that European philosophy, typified by Heidegger, had gone terribly wrong. While Heidegger wanted to focus on *dasein*—being itself—which gave priority to resoluteness (Sartre—Heidegger’s great popularizer—would frame his ethics in terms of authenticity vs. bad faith), Strauss wanted to focus on *phroneses*—practical wisdom and virtue. Since European philosophy was historicist, relativist, and positivist, the remedy was for philosophers to come to the rescue and turn back the tide of nihilism by basing the polis in something higher than the empty promises of modern life. Readers would do well to overlook the title and see Hayward’s new book as a well-written introduction to these basic themes of Straussian thought.

But the subtitle is equally misleading. The book purports to examine the ideas of Harry Jaffa and Walter Berns, but Berns turns out to be a minor character in the story, showing up only slightly more than

some of Jaffa's other intellectual sparring partners—e.g., Garry Wills, Richard Hofstadter, and Willmoore Kendall. Hayward clearly has the greater reverence for Jaffa (naturally since he studied with him at Claremont Graduate School back in the eighties) and this shows in the disproportionate attention he gives him. Hayward would have been better served simply changing the title to, "An Intellectual Biography of Harry Jaffa."

Jaffa's great contribution to intellectual history was his Americanizing of Strauss's philosophy by applying the Straussian method to the Declaration of Independence and, especially, to the greatest of all American statesmen—Abraham Lincoln. For Jaffa, statesmanship was a bridge between political theory and practice. Lincoln embodied this best—his speeches (Jaffa was a world expert on the Lincoln-Douglas debates) were masterpieces of enlightened political understanding that showed how to apply the enduring principles of the American founding to changing circumstances.

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The contest between nature and history was also central to Jaffa's thought and, in this, he continued the project begun by Strauss himself in his masterwork, *Natural Right and History*. The ancients, said Strauss, generally thought in terms of eternal verities (nature) while the moderns generally think in terms of changing truths (history). If all principles of right are contingent upon history, then nihilism must result, for history is unstable and

indeterminate. Indeed, history could lead us to totalitarianism and on what grounds, if "history" is our only standard of right, could we oppose it? Jaffa found that Lincoln could become an ally in the defense of natural right against historicism. As a graduate student in New York, Jaffa stumbled across a bound copy of the Lincoln-Douglas debates at a used bookstore and decided to use these as a framing device for explicating his Strauss-inspired approach to political philosophy. In Lincoln, Jaffa found a politician who well-articulated the timeless principles of the American founding and applied them fruitfully to new historical challenges.

Hayward clearly reveres Jaffa, but at times this emotional commitment to his subject makes the book less of an intellectual history and more of a polemic. A memoir of Jaffa might have been a more appropriate vehicle for the ideas Hayward is trying to present since he lacks the critical distance from his subject to effectively critique, rather than simply restate, Jaffa's ideas. Similarly, Jaffa (like virtually all Americans) lacked the

critical distance from the sixteenth president to effectively challenge the popular image of Lincoln as a model political philosopher or Commander in Chief.

A cynic might say that Jaffa was simply using Lincoln for rhetorical purposes. Knowing that Lincoln is perhaps the only American president who is above reproach—he is revered by virtually all Americans across racial, ideological, gender, religious, party, and class lines—Jaffa could make Lincoln the

spokesman for his own values and thus avoid pushback. Who, after all, is willing to take on the Great Emancipator? At some point, scholars will allow reason to triumph over emotion and see that Lincoln had major flaws as a president, particularly in his conduct of the Civil War. As long as the Jaffas and Haywards of the world continue to make Lincoln an icon rather than a human with failings, we will continue to avoid giving Lincoln the same critical treatment that we give to all other figures of the past. Ultimately, historical understanding will suffer.

Since Lincoln, according to Jaffa, based his actions (such as the emancipation of slaves) on natural right, he is at odds with the common historicist view that permeates modern intellectual life. Straussian opposition to historicism usually took the form of criticizing the fact-value distinction that was dominant in the academy during 1950s when Strauss and his first generation of disciples were writing. Jaffa, like Strauss, believed that combatting this value-free relativism was necessary to prevent an American lapse into the totalitarianism that had overtaken Europe in the 1940s.

It is their fear of totalitarianism that largely explains why Straussians are viewed with such suspicion and even hatred today. Until 2003, few outside academic political science departments had even heard the name Leo Strauss, but the Iraq War quickly changed that. During the George W. Bush administration, Straussian became synonymous with “neoconservative” and Straussians—such as William Kristol and Paul Wolfowitz—were blamed for the hawkish turn in American foreign policy. Kristol, a “third generation” Straussian who completed a Ph.D. at Harvard with Strauss’s student Harvey Mansfield, spearheaded the Project for a New American Century, a group that advocated bringing democracy to the Middle East through military force. Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of Defense in

the Bush Administration, studied with Straussian Allan Bloom at Cornell before heading to the University of Chicago for graduate study with Strauss himself and is generally seen as one of the foremost advocates of the Iraq War. Figures like these caused Strauss and Straussianism to be associated (perhaps unfairly) with the projection of American military force around the world.

While many of us view military invasions to spread democracy as reckless and misguided, certain Straussians have justified them by pointing to the fragility of liberal democracy. If philosophical nihilism could lead to totalitarianism in the most advanced, modern, scientific nations in Western Europe in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, why couldn’t the same happen in the U.S. in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century? Having seen western civilization descend into barbarism once, Strauss believed it could happen again and his disciples determined that radical actions, such as pre-emptive wars, were a small price to pay to ensure the continuation of the free American regime.

Many of us who opposed the Iraq War lament the Straussian involvement in politics for the same reason that we lament Marxist involvement in politics. Theories are, by definition, simplifications of reality and when applied to the human realm, they can have terrible, unanticipated consequences. This was the case in trying to create utopia through state control of the means of production (as Marx’s disciples have tried to do) or in trying to bring democracy to the Middle East through American military invasion (as Strauss’s disciples have tried to do).

And yet, as Hayward shows, the invasion of Iraq was not the first time Straussians had inserted themselves into politics. Jaffa was deeply involved in Barry Goldwater’s 1964 presidential campaign. Whereas previous Straussians (and Strauss himself)

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had mostly kept the philosopher’s distance from day-to-day political issues and controversies, Jaffa not only advised the Goldwater campaign, but also penned the Arizona Senator’s infamous “extremism in the defense of liberty” line delivered at the 1964 Republican National Convention. In Hayward’s telling, Jaffa was not only a major influence on American academic life, but on American political life as well.

Here Hayward is overstating things. A typical sin of intellectual historians, who are themselves intellectuals, is to inflate the importance of their subjects as a strange form of self-flattery (and I say this as an intellectual historian myself who is equally guilty of this sin). Jaffa and Berns ascribed too much importance to themselves and Hayward ascribes too much importance to them. The Bush administration likely would have invaded Iraq, with or without the lobbying of Wolfowitz and Kristol, and Hayward even admits that Goldwater was destined to lose the 1964 election, regardless of the ill-advised Jaffa line.

It is also overstating things to claim that the debate between Jaffa and Berns somehow “redefined American conservatism” as the title indicates. Who outside certain conservative intellectual circles even knows of their ideas and what major figures of the right today have been influenced by them? Totalitarianism, Strauss and his disciples believe, is a philosophical problem that requires a philosophical solution, but let’s not kid ourselves that philosophy is driving the conservative movement today. It is far more

a product of Sean Hannity, Ann Coulter, Rush Limbaugh, and Donald Trump than it is Harry Jaffa, Walter Berns, or Leo Strauss.

That last part of the title, “the arguments that redefined American conservatism,” held the most promise and therefore caused me the most disappointment when Hayward didn’t deliver. The biggest failing of historians of ideology today is assuming that their subjects (“liberalism” or “conservatism”) have some meaning independent of history. They don’t. Charting the ways that conservatism has been defined and redefined across the decades through mutations and selection pressures should be the central task of historians such as Hayward, and yet despite promising to do exactly that, he rests his book on the same old fallacious, essentialist assumptions that have plagued nearly every history of conservatism of the last fifty years.

To Hayward, heroic conservatives have combatted villainous liberals from the beginning of the modern era. Lacking is any understanding of the variegated, incoherent, and even self-contradictory nature of these ideologies. An accurate (and more historically objective) approach to conservatism and liberalism would see that they are mixed bags of many competing impulses, tendencies, and ideas of varying value. It’s self-evidently false that conservatism is entirely good and liberalism entirely bad simply because they have both taken on thousands of different and contradictory meanings over the years. There isn’t a transcendent conservatism that persists throughout space and time,

only different bundles of political positions called “conservative” at a given moment because of their temporary attachment to the conservative tribe. Conservatism, in certain contexts, means commitment to free trade (i.e., Milton Friedman); in other contexts, conservatism means opposition to free trade (i.e., Donald Trump and William McKinley). Since these opposite positions have been considered “conservative” at different times and both can’t be correct, then conservatism can’t be inherently correct. Declaring *a priori* (as ideologues do) that one side of the political spectrum has a monopoly on truth is demonstrably false and sadly dogmatic.

Of course, essentializing ideologies also leads historians such as Hayward into fruitless and meaningless attempts to recruit the heroes of history to their own ideological teams. Naturally, both sides want to go after the greatest historical trophy of all—Abraham Lincoln. Hayward claims that Lincoln’s patriotism and commitment to the principle of natural right makes him one of the great “conservative” figures of American history, but why can’t we all just let Lincoln be Lincoln without trying to stuff him into our narrow ideological boxes? Lincoln’s views simply do not fit neatly into today’s political categories. Depending on how one defines “left” and “right” (and everyone offers different definitions) we can turn anyone we like into a “conservative” or “progressive” through a kind of baptism of the dead, but this is *ex-post* storytelling of the most presentist kind. Until historians such as Hayward treat ideologies as contingent, changing products of circumstance, their works will be more misleading than informative. Cheerleading history, like the one Hayward has given us here, only re-inscribes the false paradigm of left-right essentialism that is responsible for so much tribalism and political confusion in both the past and present.

Although the debate between Jaffa and Burns did not “redefine American conservatism,” it did represent a fissure within Straussianism itself. “West Coast” and “East Coast” schools of Straussians have long contended over the questions of freedom vs. virtue and rights vs. duties, but this debate is not confined to the political right. The left-wing tribe is currently becoming redefined as well. Campus radicals, certain of their own absolute virtue, reject longstanding liberal principles of free speech in the name of excising evils such as racism and sexism from the university. Until recently, commitment to free speech was seen as an essential, defining characteristic of “liberalism” and was employed with particular force against Senator McCarthy and anti-communist zealots during the early years of the Cold War. Willmoore Kendall’s belief that campuses should forbid certain unpopular opinions was once considered “radically right-wing,” but O, how times change and how quickly our ideologies flip-flop in meaning! The exact arguments used by McCarthyites of the right against the left in the 1950s (e.g., “Some ideas are so dangerous, they must be out of bounds,” “Free speech is just a cover for totalitarianism”) are now used by the left against the right. While the principle of free speech remains, the tribe that adopts the principle changes.

Perhaps the best evidence that ideologies evolve is the shift in foreign policy hawkishness from a left-wing to a right-wing cause. Hayward notes that Strauss, Jaffa, Berns and others considered themselves liberals and Democrats all the way through the 1950s for the primary reason that liberal Democrats were more likely to use military force against foreign totalitarianism (à la Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman) while conservative Republicans were more likely to retreat into isolationism (à la Robert Taft). Of course, by

2005 the ideologies had switched places. Conservatism had become the ideology of foreign policy hawkishness and liberalism had become the ideology of isolation. The Straussians were important agents in bringing about this mutation in conservatism and Hayward might have profitably applied this evolutionary lens to understanding his subjects. We typically think of neoconservatives as those who moved from left to right, but more often than not, neoconservatives didn't change, conservatism did.

Hayward also suggests that conservatives have always fought for "small government," but this is manifestly false in both the past and present. Until the early 20th century, commitment to limited government was considered liberal, not conservative, and even today it's not clear that "conservatives" want to roll back government. Despite all of their rhetoric, government has grown more under conservative Republicans (such as George W. Bush) than under liberal or even progressive Democrats (such as Clinton or Obama). It's true that conservatives are committed to cutting taxes—and back up their words with actions—but cutting taxes has an inverse relationship to smaller government (the public actually demands more public services when tax rates are lower since government spending feels "free"). Moderates, such as Bill Clinton and Dwight Eisenhower, have as a matter of historical fact done far more in the way of cutting government than have conservatives such as George W. Bush.

Perhaps conservatism and limited government had a strong connection at the time of Goldwater's candidacy, but that moment is long gone and conservatism has evolved into an ideology committed in practice to nationalism, immigration restriction, and tax cutting. Even the hawkishness that seemed so central to conservatism just a decade ago now appears

to be fading (self-described conservatives today poll even higher than self-described liberals on the question, "Should America mind its own business in the world?").

Committed conservative that he is, Hayward also has little patience for moderates. To him, they are losers with names like Romney, McCain, and Dole. Staunch right-wingers like George W. Bush, on the other hand, win elections. And yet if Hayward really believes in limited government, why would he want "big government conservatives" like Bush in office? Those truly committed to limiting the size, scope, and spending of the federal government should challenge, rather than celebrate, right wing policies which have led to statism in practice. But, in his commitment to conservative essentialism, Hayward ignores this inconvenient fact and continues to cheerlead for "the right" even if their ideology works against principles he claims to uphold.

Instead of engaging in the futile attempt to identify "true conservatives" and "true conservatism" over the course of American history, historians like Hayward would do much better to expose the contingency and instability of our ideologies. The freedom that Hayward believes he is fighting for would be much better served by exposing the spurious connection between "right wing" fascism and "right wing" libertarianism—they are opposites—but as long as we see the world in terms of a unidimensional political spectrum, we will continue to confuse one for the other. If we can let conservatism evolve, then we can see that it has undergone a major transformation from Goldwater's time to now. Hayward's commitment to some undefined and imaginary "true conservatism" blinds him to this crucial historical reality.

While adherence to ideological essentialism is Hayward's greatest weakness,

his clear, accessible writing is his greatest strength. Most intellectual historians seem incapable of writing without jargon and pretense, but Hayward makes the reader feel as if he is having an enjoyable conversation with a pleasant, intelligent friend. In contradistinction to Strauss and most of his disciples and interpreters, Hayward presents his material in a way that is meant to be enjoyed rather than simply endured. While most Straussian writing seems intentionally designed to weed out readers, Hayward's writing seems intentionally designed to draw them in. Many academics are intentionally obscure, fearing that clarity would expose the shallowness of their ideas, but smart writers like Hayward have no need to hide a lack of intelligence behind jargon.

Of course, a conversational style can have its downsides too. Like a voluble raconteur, Hayward often veers off into tangents and repetition. In a longer book, this might be forgivable, but in a book of 300 pages, it comes off as undisciplined. It often seems as if he is using Jaffa as a mere jumping-off point to introduce some of his own free-floating ideas. For instance, a whole chapter covers Hayward's hobbyhorse of conservative jurisprudence and there is hardly a mention of Jaffa or Berns. This was

interesting, but had little to do with the subject of the book and felt forced. The repetition in Hayward's conversational writing is also made worse by his constant calling attention to it by using phrases such as, "as we shall see" and "as mentioned previously." A meandering work of intellectual history may be more fun than a more tightly structured one, but it also appears less serious.

But if the reader can look past the unfulfilled promises of the title and appreciate this book for what it is—an informal look at various elements of conservative history through the lens of Harry Jaffa—they will be richly rewarded. Jaffa and Berns were not redefining conservatism, nor were they saving the world from totalitarianism, but they were advancing interesting arguments that are worth reading about. Hayward has done an admirable job presenting and interpreting these ideas in this insightful book. **A**

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Steven F. Hayward, *Patriotism is Not Enough: Harry Jaffa, Walter Berns, and the Arguments That Redefined American Conservatism*. Encounter Books, 304pp., \$26 cloth.