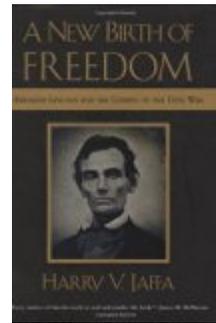


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Harry V. Jaffa. *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000. xiv + 549 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-9952-0.

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FATHER ABRAHAM AND THE CAUSE OF UNION

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Forty-two years ago, Harry V. Jaffa first published his treatment of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, *Crisis of the House Divided*.^[1] I still remember the heady experience of reading that book as a graduate student in the early 1980s: here was an author steeped in political philosophy who explicated the issues between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas with infinite care, and with painstaking attention to historical events, and who brought to light in the most serious way the enduring importance of the principles of the Declaration of Independence in American politics. *Crisis* was a tough act to follow, and for many years those of us who admire it have read Jaffa's subsequent books (mostly collections of essays) with twinges of disappointment while wondering when his long-promised sequel on Lincoln would appear. In his most recent books in particular, Jaffa seemed to have become a mere controversialist taking on subjects such as constitutional law where he seemed simply out of his element.^[2]

Still, as I turned now and then to my dog-eared copy of *Crisis*, I could remind myself (and tell students) that as a vindication of Lincoln the book simply had no peer. Until now. *A New Birth of Freedom* is an even better book than the earlier one. Taking up the tale of Lincoln's statesmanship in the secession crisis of 1860-61, Jaffa offers what he calls "a commentary on the Gettysburg Address," but one that is therefore necessarily "a commentary on the speeches and deeds that constituted the his-

torical process during the fourscore and seven years preceding, no less than on the conflict of the war itself" (p. xi). That description signals a very ambitious book indeed, but Jaffa more than fulfills that ambition. It is no exaggeration to say that this is the best book one can read to understand 1) the political thought, rhetoric, and action of Lincoln; 2) the meaning and truth of the Declaration of Independence; 3) the political science of John C. Calhoun; 4) the final implosion of Stephen Douglas's "popular sovereignty" doctrine; and 5) the deepest character of the conflict between North and South in the Civil War.

Along the way, he sheds important light on the thought of Thomas Jefferson and of James Madison; on the thought of Rousseau, Hegel, Kant, Marx, and Darwin and their connections to or influences on antebellum American thought; on the failure of twentieth-century historians (Carl Becker being the great exemplar) to understand the American founding; on the origins of positivism in political science, legal thought, and historical scholarship; and on the parallel sources of American political principles in both reason and revelation. Elegantly and forcefully written, *A New Birth of Freedom* may be considered by some readers to suffer from a certain degree of repetition, as arguments reappear and are restated in multiple contexts. These repeated restatements, however, are not merely forgivable but necessary, as Jaffa stands firmly on the ground of a central idea that has been subjected to attacks from multiple quarters, against which he defends it.

That central idea, as expressed by Lincoln, is this: “As I would not be a *slave*, so I would not be a *master*. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is not democracy” (quoted, p. 155). This statement encapsulates the essentials of Jaffa’s argument throughout *A New Birth of Freedom*. He who would be neither slave nor master refuses either status because of a principle that flows from a fact: that all human beings are one another’s equals in the decisive moral and political respects – none is either a beast to be mastered by men, or a god to master them. It follows that republican government, respectful of natural rights and founded on consent, is the only alternative to anarchy or tyranny. This was the view from the American founding, the view that came under assault only as the nation’s initially necessary toleration of slavery warped and twisted in one half of the country, under the pressure of self-interest, into an affirmation of slavery’s positive good, and in the other half of the country came near to becoming a matter of indifference. It was the task of Lincoln’s statesmanship to save and restore that “ancient faith” before its degradation and denial became an irretrievable loss. That he undertook the task knowing full well that his own words and deeds could help precipitate a civil war whose outcome would mean the life or death of that faith should only increase our awe when contemplating the terrible burden he carried.

Part of that burden was in making good the promise of *The Federalist No. 1*, that under a just republicanism ballots (“reflection and choice”) should succeed bullets (“accident and force”) as the means of deciding the nation’s future direction. Jaffa regards the 1800 election (discussed in chapter 1) as the pivotal precursor to the 1860 election, for it was in 1800 that a free election between bitterly rivalrous parties first resulted in a peaceful transfer of power from one to the other. Jefferson, who appears here in an ambiguous light, seemed in his Kentucky Resolutions to appeal not to election but to revolution for the vindication of the Declaration’s republican principles. (Whether those principles were truly in jeopardy in 1798 is a matter about which Jaffa and I might differ, but that is of no consequence here.) But what began as revolutionary rhetoric evolved into electoral canvassing, and the establishment of a democratic precedent that Lincoln was determined not to see reversed: that when the electorate decides the future course of public policy on matters of the greatest moment (such as the future of slavery in the territories), there is no gainsaying that result at the ballot box but by a subsequent regular election or by the making of a just revolution against tyranny.

And there can be no justice in a rebellion, dressed up however it might be in the false political science of “state rights” or “secession,” whose aim is itself tyrannical.

In the three most masterly historical chapters here, Jaffa explores Lincoln’s posture on the brink of war in the First Inaugural Address (chapters 4 and 5), and just after the war began in the message of July 4, 1861 to a special session of Congress (chapter 6). In more than a hundred densely argued pages, the chapters on the first inaugural address weave together all the strands of the mounting antebellum crisis, the struggle over the meaning and relation of the Declaration and the Constitution, the disaster of the Dred Scott ruling, the two electoral struggles between Douglas and Lincoln in 1858 and 1860, and the post-electoral secession of half the South, into a focused meditation on the magnanimous but uncompromising speech of a new president in a precarious military situation who had to speak of peace but gird for war. The more condensed and tragic poetry of the Second Inaugural Address has tended to overshadow the great achievement of the First, and Jaffa deserves thanks for restoring the First Inaugural to the front rank of Lincoln’s great public utterances.

The same may be said of Jaffa’s treatment of the great July 4 message to Congress. Now, with the war under way, “Lincoln, as president and commander in chief, must save the Union from physical destruction. But first he must save it from ingenious sophistry” (p. 368). The July 4 message offers Lincoln’s best defense – and it is quite good enough – of his understanding of executive power under the Constitution. It rebuts yet again the pretensions of secessionist theorizing. It reiterates Lincoln’s belief – rightly held – that “[t]he Union is older than any of the States, and, in fact, it created them as States” (quoted, p. 377). But it reaches its peak in Lincoln’s claim that the war was “essentially a people’s contest,” a struggle for the fulfillment of the American promise “to lift artificial weights from all shoulders ... to afford all an unfettered start, and a fair chance in the race of life” (quoted, p. 395). Even in the midst of war, as Jaffa shows, Lincoln appealed to the ordinary people of the South as well as the North to repair to the standard maxims of free government from which all might benefit. But the common white folk of the South had imbibed from Calhoun “the social function of the distinction of race in the slave states: It reduced to insignificance the social distance between whites, because of the great gulf that divided all whites from blacks” (p. 396). Hence it was that members of all classes of whites in the South “were nonetheless often attached to slavery with fierce devotion” (*ibid.*). And

so the principal audience of the July 4 message, under the circumstances, remained the Congress of the Union and its constituents, who were called upon to prosecute the “people’s contest” against their southern brethren for the latter’s own sake – a cause identical with that of Union itself, with self-government, and with the ultimate goal of ridding the nation of slavery.

Bracketing these central chapters on Lincoln in the crucible of secession and war are chapters of surpassing insight into the malign modes of thought that nearly brought the nation to ruin and whose legacy still haunts certain quarters in contemporary thought. Commenting in his second chapter on “the historians” who have ill-served the students of our own century, Jaffa writes: “So far as I know ... no historian who has written about the Civil War has seriously asked whether Lincoln’s belief in the truth of the Declaration can be accepted, not merely as emotionally evocative and persuasive, but as philosophically sound.... But if the question as to whether the philosophy of the Declaration is true or false is essentially meaningless, then questions as to whether slavery is right or wrong or whether freedom is better than despotism are equally meaningless” (p. 75).[3] Such historians, at their best, are the intellectual stepchildren of Roger Taney, who held with an exacting pseudo-Kantianism that the founders could not have seriously meant what they appeared to say about equality in the Declaration and continued to tolerate slavery anywhere in their midst for another instant (see pp. 292-93). I meet the stepchildren of these stepchildren of Taney every semester in my introductory class discussions of the Declaration. It takes considerable effort to show these young worshipers of the false idol of progress, not always with success on my part, what Jaffa shows so brilliantly here: that the racial views of a substantial portion of Americans became worse rather than better in the decades following the founding.

That decline is illuminated in Jaffa’s third chapter (on James Buchanan, Jefferson Davis, and Alexander Stephens), his seventh chapter (on Calhoun), and his appendix (on Douglas) as arising from intellectual developments inimical to America’s founding principles: the identification of nature with history, the ascription of rights to communities and not to individuals, the emerging “scientism” of racial theory (often quasi-Darwinian), and the displacement of reason by a version of Rousseau’s “general will” (in Calhoun’s over-praised theory of concurrent majorities). Here are some of Jaffa’s most penetrating observations, grounding his account of the struggle for a just American republicanism in the

perennial arguments of political philosophy, from Plato and Aristotle to Hegel and Nietzsche.

There is a certain abruptness to the way *A New Birth of Freedom* is brought to a close, with its treatments of Calhoun and Douglas followed by no further return to Lincoln. Perhaps this is because Jaffa has promised yet a third volume “on the triumph and tragedy of the war years” (p. xiv). As he has now passed his eightieth year, we can only hope that Jaffa has this final work well in hand. When the trilogy is completed, it will no doubt long outlive its author as a standing rebuke to the academic practitioners of “a shallow and permissive historicism and relativism [who] have subjected the ‘laws of nature and of nature’s God’ to scorn and contempt” (p. 471). With thorough historical scholarship, acute philosophical reasoning, and a humane and civilized sensibility, Harry Jaffa has already brought us, not merely a “Lincoln for our times,” but Lincoln as he was, is, and ever shall be.

Notes

[1]. Harry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959). The book was subsequently republished with a new introduction by the University of Washington Press in 1973, and with a new preface by the University of Chicago Press in 1982. The Chicago edition remains in print.

[2]. See, e.g., Harry V. Jaffa, *Original Intent and the Framers of the Constitution: A Disputed Question* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1994), reviewed by the present author in *The Review of Politics* 58 (1996): 390-96.

[3]. By no means does Jaffa attempt a comprehensive review of the historical scholarship on the founding, on Lincoln, or on the antebellum period, which some may see as a fault but which would in fact have been a major distraction from the tightly focused discussion Jaffa provides. Carl Becker, as noted above, is the principal target of this chapter, for in Jaffa’s view his “perspective on the natural rights philosophy has remained unchanged and unchallenged in the mainstream of the academic world” (p. 75), even while the “earlier revisionism” represented by Becker was replaced by a later revisionism, differing somewhat but in Jaffa’s opinion not decisively, in the second half of the twentieth century. Among those historians subjected to criticism (in varying degrees) in Jaffa’s notes to this chapter are J.G. Randall, Avery Craven, George Fort Milton, Allan Nevins, Robert Johannsen, Shelby Foote, Garry Wills, David Brion Davis, and William W. Freehling.

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