



INDIANA UNIVERSITY BLOOMINGTON
OSTROM WORKSHOP

TOCQUEVILLE LECTURE SERIES

Ken I. Kersch

Professor of Political Science, Boston College

Friday, March 26, 2021: 12:00 – 1:30 pm EST

Virtual via Zoom: [Click here for link to Zoom meeting](#)



The Messianic Executive in American Conservative Political Thought

Postwar conservatives have long criticized the modern American “progressive” presidency as dangerously “Caesarist.” Less attention has been paid to the movement’s own version of the messianic executive underwritten by the West Coast Straussian paradigm of Harry V. Jaffa, which reached its apotheosis with widespread West Coast Straussian support for Donald Trump. To better understand this paradigm, I will canvas the thought of the mid-century conservative movement institutionalist critics who warned about political dangers inherent in Jaffa’s quasi-religious, messianic reading of Abraham Lincoln as a vindicator of the nation’s foundational commitment to the equality of natural rights. I consider these earlier critiques in relation to recent work by Alison McQueen’s on apocalyptic political imaginaries. I argue that Jaffa’s messianism dovetailed with consonant visions of catastrophe, apocalypse, and saving deliverance pervading the contemporary Religious Right to underwrite unprecedented levels of executive demagoguery - and dangerous, anti-constitutional political violence.

Ken I. Kersch is Professor of Political Science at Boston College. His work has won major awards, including the Edward S. Corwin Award, the Hughes-Gossett Award, the J. David Greenstone Prize, and the C. Herman Pritchett Prize (2020). Professor Kersch has published many articles, chapters, and reviews. He is the author of five books, including *American Political Thought: An Invitation* (Polity, 2021) and *Conservatives and the Constitution: Imagining Constitutional Restoration in the Heyday of American Liberalism* (Cambridge, 2019).

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