

The Messianic Executive in American Conservative Political Thought

Ken I. Kersch*

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“And the war came.”

Epigraph - Harry V. Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom* (2000)

Introduction

One of the major veins of contemporary regime-based scholarship on the American presidency posits a disjuncture between the traditional presidency and its modern variant, and argues that the newer incarnation of the office, dating from the progressive era (or, alternatively, FDR), is defined by radically augmented demands and expectations for programmatic leadership, both generally and vis-a-vis the U.S. Congress. While models of the disjunctive modern presidency have issued from scholars across the political spectrum -- with Theodore Lowi (1985) and Sid Milkis (1993) (roughly) on the liberal-Left, Jeffrey Tulis (1987) on the center-Right, and John Marini, Ken Masugi, R.J. Pestritto, and others on the far Right -- the Right-wing regime version has becoming increasingly elaborated and influential amongst conservatives, where it has underwritten both a frontal assault on progressivism more generally (spearheaded by assaults against progressive presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson) and, in turn, amongst most of the same people, a fervent support for President Donald Trump.¹ Amongst the characterizations of the legacy of the modern “progressive” presidency is “Caesarism.”²

Recent political developments have thrown into high relief the Right’s current penchant for the strenuous denunciation of the Caesarist/authoritarian/totalitarian Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Delano Roosevelt while simultaneously voicing strident, unrepentant support for Donald Trump, whose lawless

* Professor of Political Science, Boston College. kersch@bc.edu.

¹ Ken I. Kersch, “Constitutional Conservatives Remember the Progressive Era,” in Skowronek, Engel, and Ackerman, eds., *The Progressive Century*.

² See, e.g., Scot J. Zentner, “Caesarism and the American Presidency,” *Politics and Policy* 24 (4) (December 1996): 629-653.

authoritarian turn -- to the point of refusing to accede to the lawful transition of power to his duly elected successor (including inciting a violent attack on the Article I U.S. Congress) is unparalleled in American history. This suggests that the contemporary Right's ostensible opposition to Caesarism is, at a minimum, considerably more complicated than their current self-understanding allows for.

Drawing and building upon my recent intellectual history of postwar American constitutional conservatism,³ this paper will remind readers of a time when leading figures of the postwar conservative movement -- including Willmoore Kendall,⁴ M.E. Bradford, Frank Meyer, and Jeffrey Hart -- warned of a vein of "Caesarist" thought concerning the presidency within their own movement, amongst the group of scholars now known as West Coast Straussians. That same group is the very same group who have been widely and rightly identified as the most fervent intellectual supporters of President Donald J. Trump. If progressives were indeed champions of a modern Caesarist presidency, this paper will suggest that there is more than one road to Caesarism.

Presidential Caesarism

In his article arguing that Franklin Delano Roosevelt initiated "the modern Caesarian presidency," Scot Zentner defines the phenomenon as follows:

Theoretically, Caesarism connotes a phenomenon in which the many in a republic give up their claim to rule for the sake of the comforts and security offered by a charismatic or otherwise persuasive leader. The leader is believed to rule, not for his own sake, but precisely for the good of the people. The people forsake self-rule even though they believe the

³ Ken I. Kersch, *Conservatives and the Constitution: Imagining Constitutional Restoration in the Heyday of American Liberalism* (Cambridge, 2019).

⁴ See "Source of American Caesarism: Review of Harry V. Jaffa," *National Review* (November 7, 1959).

leader rules them on their behalf.⁵

Drawing on Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Zentner explains that the historical Caesar is portrayed there as ruling on behalf of the people, "yet the republic is soon destroyed ... on behalf of the people, and in the name of Caesar." Caesar "promise[s] the people salvation from politics by assuming the burden of rule through his own personal sacrifice." In political terms, "a Caesar is one who offers relief to a people overwhelmed by the burdens of self-government." The deliverance on offer is from the burdens, and requirements, of deliberation, compromise, bargaining, and possible defeat. Such a deliverance, Zentner observes, makes the Casearist executive the enemy of the constitutional republic.⁶

The Mid-Century Debate⁷

The route to Messianic Ceasarism in the work of Claremont McKenna College's Harry V. Jaffa followed what at first blush might seem like an unlikely path. Jaffa's "propositionalist" argument was that the American political regime, rightly understood, was premised upon a foundational commitment to the equality of natural rights, as articulated by Thomas Jefferson at the opening of the Declaration of Independence, and apotheosized in the anti-slavery

⁵ Zentner, 630.

⁶ Zentner, 630.

⁷ The discussion that follows draws extensively, as revised, from Kersch, *Conservatives and the Constitution*. I omit pinpoint cites. Among the works discussed and referenced in this section are: Harry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (1959); Harry V. Jaffa, "Another Look at the Declaration," *National Review* (July 11, 1980): 836-40; Willmoore Kendall, *The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition* (1970); M.E. Bradford, "The Heresy of Equality: Bradford Replies to Jaffa," *Modern Age* 20 (1976) 62; M.E. Bradford, "A Firebell in the Night: The Southern Conservative View," *Modern Age* 17 (Winter 1973): 9; M.E. Bradford, "Dividing the House: The Gnosticism of Lincoln's Political Rhetoric," *Modern Age* 23 (1979), 10; Jeffrey Hart, "Peter Berger's Paradox," *National Review* (May 12, 1972), 512; Frank S. Mayer, "Again on Lincoln," *National Review* (January 25, 1966), 71-72; M.J. Sobran, "Saving the Declaration," *National Review* 30 (December 22, 1978), 1601-02.

constitutional thought of Abraham Lincoln. Jaffa argued that the Declaration's stated commitment to the equality of natural rights – as reaffirmed by the Gettysburg Address (1863) – was the keystone of American constitutionalism. Jaffa further held that, although a necessary compromise, the country's acceptance of the reality of chattel slavery at its Founding involved a tragic betrayal of the nation's foundational commitment to the equality of natural rights. In time, however, this commitment was redeemed by Lincoln's actions and thought, which redirected the nation to this constitutive proposition. It was Jaffa's propositionalist veneration of Lincoln that, his critics intuited, opened a path to Messianic Casearism.

The West Coast Straussianism which personally moralistic and combative Jaffa founded and propagated was not weak beer. It was apocalyptic and redemptive. The Declaration and Lincoln were the indisputable Rock upon which the Church of America had been built. It was a faith, and it required profession. While philosophic, it also has a historical dimension which presented American history as a great drama filled with characters who either subscribed to the faith, or denied it. Jaffa's account of American history was that of one betrayal after another, by those who would tear it down, and, in its place, worship a golden calf (the Biblical imagery is Jaffa's). American history was littered with incidents, events, and heretical thought traditions in which the principles of the Declaration and the teachings of Lincoln had been -- and continue to be -- ignored, flouted, or corrupted.

Jaffa first propounded his constitutional theory rooted in the slavery, the Declaration, and Lincoln in his magisterial interpretation of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, *Crisis of the House Divided* (1959), and subsequently reiterated and evangelized for this interpretation in countless articles, lectures, and reviews.⁸ Jaffa's writings over the full span of his life emphasized this

⁸ It is an article of faith amongst Straussians that Jaffa significantly deepened the constitutional/political theory advanced in *Crisis of the House Divided*, and, indeed, undertook a profoundly significant "turn" (from a

signal failure -- and, hence, the incompleteness -- of a founding that had compromised to preserve chattel slavery. Jaffa characterized this bargain as a condemnable “inability” or unwillingness on the part of the Founders to commit themselves in the Constitution to the eternal, unchanging, God-given principles of the Declaration. The capacity of the people to govern themselves -- democracy -- Jaffa argued, is “demonstrated” when the nation commits itself to living under submission to the natural law (“the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God” referenced in the Declaration), which embodies objective standards of right and wrong. As such, by placing the Declaration’s commitment to natural rights at its core, Abraham Lincoln belatedly completed the Constitution, redeeming the U.S.’s Founding by instituting “a new birth of freedom.” Thus, for Jaffa, the abolition of chattel slavery, and theory underlying it (as Jaffa understood it), involved no less than the belated establishment of a government under the superintendence of objectively discernable natural law.

Jaffa read the American constitutional tradition through the lens of classical political philosophy. Tracing the term for “constitution” used in the ancient Greek texts – *politeia* – Jaffa noted that, for Aristotle, a *polis* was a partnership in *politeia*, where *politeia* “is not the laws, but rather the animating principle of the laws, by virtue of which the laws are laws of a certain kind.” In finding the “life principle of the nation” in the Declaration, Jaffa explained, Lincoln understood American constitutionalism in precisely the same way. For the nation’s redeemer president, “the relation of the famous proposition to the Constitution and Union corresponded to the relation of soul to body.”

deontological Lockean to a teleological Aristotelian (and even Thomistic) understanding of rights [sic] in his follow up opus *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War* (1980). It seems clear to me, however, that the teleological Aristotelianism was present in the first book, and the purported “turn” actually represented further reflections along the same lines. The “turn” thesis seems more a product of the emotional penchant amongst Straussians for (quasi) religious dramas involving repentances, conversions and epiphanies than an actual revision of the argument.

This story of national redemption, pivoting on Lincoln, informed not only Jaffa's account of emancipation but also his reading of the entire arc and spirit of American history, as instantiated in its constitutional politics, from the Founding to the present. Jaffa imagined that politics as involving a perpetual, epic, and millennial conflict between the partisans of (unredeemed) legal positivism and a (saved) polity anchored in an uncompromising faith in natural law; a conflict between self-government understood as embodying what the people will, and self-government as embodying a struggle for the polity's adoption of what it ought to will. Jaffa believed that the nation's very survival depended upon a perpetually renewed national commitment to a redeemed Constitution – a Constitution that embodied fixed, eternal standards of equality, justice, and truth.

It was Jaffa's contention in *Crisis of the House Divided* that this epic conflict and choice had been publicly argued in its most dramatic and sophisticated form in the Lincoln-Douglas debates, which Jaffa pronounced the world's greatest political and philosophic text. There, as he described it, Lincoln and Douglas did no less than debate "the universal meaning of the Declaration." "No political contest in history was more exclusively or passionately concerned with the character of the beliefs in which the souls of men were to abide," Jaffa dramatically claimed. "Neither the differences which divided the Moslem and Christian at the time of the Crusades, nor the differences which divided Protestant and Catholic in sixteenth century Europe, nor those which arrayed the crowned heads of Europe against the regicides of Revolutionary France were believed by the warring advocates to be more important to their salvation, individually and collectively."

Jaffa found a direct parallel between the position Lincoln took in those debates and the conception of classical natural right propounded by his teacher Leo Strauss in *Natural Right and*

History (1953). Considered by his student Jaffa to be “the greatest political philosopher of the 20th century,” Strauss had “proved” in *Natural Right and History* that by attempting to replace faith with reason, modern, as opposed to classical, philosophy had “laid the foundation of modern atheistic totalitarianism, the most terrible form of tyranny in human experience.” While studying Plato’s *Republic* under the tutelage of the master at The New School for Social Research (before Strauss moved to the University of Chicago), Jaffa had “discovered . . . that the issue between Lincoln and Douglas was in substance, and very nearly in form, identical with the issue between Socrates and Thrasymachus.” Stephen Douglas’s defense of “the golden calf of popular sovereignty” was, in essence, Jaffa said, the position that might makes right – that the majority not only does rule but should, without any objective standard of wrong and right to serve as its compass. “Lincoln, however, insisted that the case for popular government depended upon a standard of right and wrong independent of mere opinion and one which was not justified merely by the counting of heads”: “Hence,” Jaffa concluded, “the Lincolnian case for government of the people and by the people always implied that being for the people meant being for a moral purpose that informs the people’s being.”

Lincoln, for Jaffa, was the world-historical figure who stood fast when the great nation he led was most “tempted to abandon its ‘ancient faith.’” Through close readings of a number of Lincoln’s speeches presented in the form of “teachings” concerning foundational principles of politics, Jaffa gave Stephen Douglas his due. Jaffa’s Douglas recognized and acknowledged that chattel slavery was morally wrong, notwithstanding his support for popular sovereignty. As a matter of politics, however, Jaffa’s Douglas committed himself to value neutrality. He believed that the substantive issues involving slavery were constitutionally consigned to the state and territorial governments, and, as such, slavery was best apprehended constitutionally as “a

jurisdictional question.” In his study of Lincoln’s *Address before a Young Men’s Lyceum* (1838), Jaffa explained Lincoln’s very different understanding. For Lincoln, the question of the capability of the people to govern themselves “was always twofold: it referred both to the viability of popular political institutions and to their moral basis in the individual men who must make those institutions work.” Moral institutions could only be made and sustained by individually moral men.

Here, Jefferson’s decision in the Declaration to substitute “the pursuit of happiness” for John Locke’s protection for “property” in his similarly worded *Second Treatise on Civil Government* (1689) loomed large for Jaffa. This substitution in phrasing “proved” to Jaffa that the United States was founded on the principle of the pursuit of moral virtue. Jaffa interpreted the philosophical import of the Declaration’s “pursuit of happiness” language to have launched a polity committed to the aspirational pursuit of the supreme Good – to “a transcendental affirmation of what it ought to be.” By advisedly substituting the phrase “pursuit of happiness” for the word “property,” in other words, as Jaffa would have it, Jefferson had remedied a core theoretical defect in the political philosophy of Hobbes and Locke, and committed the new nation to the pursuit of moral perfection, understood by the lights of objective truth. If man, in the state of nature, or by nature, pursues happiness, then by nature he pursues a *summum bonum* and does not merely flee a *summum malum*.

The theoretical defect in Hobbes and Locke, Jaffa emphasized, was not a defect of the Declaration. But the question -- and the ultimate test -- remained: did contemporary Americans have the faith to avail themselves of their rich heritage? Jaffa reminded readers that in *Natural Right and History* (1953), Strauss asked one of this most momentous of questions: “Does this nation in its maturity still cherish the faith in which it was conceived and raised? Does it still

hold those ‘truths to be self-evident?’” Until they could be answered with a ringing affirmative, Jaffa explained, Strauss “did not believe this nation, or the West, could recover its moral health or political vigor.” It was the mission of conservative Americans to fight for the triumph of this faith.

The question at the heart of the Lincoln-Douglas debates -- which was, at heart, the question of whether slavery was right or wrong -- was not only a live intellectual issue for Jaffa, but the prism through which Americans today should both understand and practice contemporary politics. Until his death in 2015, Jaffa -- and the phalanx of his students drilled in these teachings at the Claremont Graduate University -- aggressively interrogated the contemporary American political scene, fired by the faith that they stood in the shoes of Lincoln, faced with the question of the future of chattel slavery, as dark clouds were descending, and the nation moved towards civil war.

Chattel slavery itself, of course, no longer existed in the U.S. But legatees of the enslavers and their defenders, Straussians were instructed, certainly did: positivists, historicists, secularists, (moral and cultural) relativists, and nihilists, typically found on the progressive left, and within the value neutral social sciences. All, Jaffa taught, shared all the same presumptions that their (purported) predecessors in the slave South had used to justify chattel slavery.

With the exception of leading Lincoln scholars -- who praised of Jaffa’s pioneering, elaborate, and careful parsing of the Lincoln-Douglas debates -- progressives and scholars on the liberal-left paid Jaffa little attention, if they were even aware of him. On the Right, however, it was a different story. This is because Jaffa’s fire was famously directly equally -- and more immediately, in a personal sense -- at his bedfellows in the postwar conservative movement. Jaffa lamented that the Declaration’s insistence that “all men are created equal” was a

“proposition that is anathema to American conservatives. It is hardly too much to say that they regard it with an aversion equal to that with which they regard ‘all history is the history of class struggle.’”

Jaffa’s Conservative Movement Critics

From the 1950s through the mid-1970s, Jaffa’s understandings faced sustained and serious challenges from conservative scholars and intellectuals who chafed at Jaffa’s millennial and apocalyptic moralism, and expressed profound concerns about what sort of politics it might unleash and encourage. The movement’s low but solid structuralists (including “East Coast” Straussians like Walter Berns)⁹ set themselves against West Coast Straussianism’s redemptive moralism. In conservative magazines like *National Review* “deliberate sense” structuralists like Willmoore Kendall and Martin Diamond and redemptive (critics said “messianic”) West Coast moralists like Harry Jaffa – and their various surrogates and partisans -- staged highly public debates on these matters.

In contrast to Jaffa, Willmoore Kendall’s understanding of the American constitutional order (or, as the Straussians would have it, its “regime”) was derived from a close reading of the constitutional text, the American national experience (that is, U.S. heritage and traditions), and (commonsense) political theory. As Kendall understood it, the critical feature of the US Constitution was its foundation in popular sovereignty, as set out in the document’s preamble: the American constitutional order set out a framework of government designed to institute and

⁹ Borrowing from Henry II’s complaint about Thomas Becket, Berns famously exasperated about Jaffa “Who will rid us of this pest of a priest?” For an elaborate account of the intra-movement antagonism between Berns and Jaffa, see Steven Hayward, *Patriotism is Not Enough: Harry Jaffa, Walter Berns, and the Arguments that Redefined American Conservatism* (2017).

implement as fundamental law the “deliberate sense” (Hamilton) of the American people. Kendall criticized what he took to be many people’s overemphasis on the role of both rights and (plebiscitary) direct democracy in the constitutional framework, which he contended was seriously distorting the constitutional system. Kendall took the Constitution’s Preamble very seriously: he considered the rest of the text that followed a set of mechanisms for achieving the six co-equal goals it lists. But Kendall recognized that the priority accorded to each of these six goals relative to the others would be different at different times. Which would take precedence at a particular time would depend on the deliberate sense of the people, as distilled through the appropriate constitutional forms, which were conducive to serious deliberation. Kendall considered these goals to be the basic “symbols” of American politics (a label he adopted from Eric Voegelin). They assumed the august status of symbols because they were “rooted in order of being, of permanent actuality,” the portal through which we access and apprehend eternal Truth. For this reason, Kendall considered the American Constitution a sacred text, “perhaps touched by the divine.” The high responsibility of subsequent generations of Americans was to preserve this legacy, and live well under it. “Throughout his career,” M.J. Sobran reported, “Kendall deplored the messianic pretensions . . . of what we may . . . call the Declaration Tradition, with its universalism and stress on individual rights.” “Against this,” Sobran explained, “he placed the Constitutional Tradition of government by consensus, which tended to mute sharp moral issues and scale down grandiose causes to politically assimilable dimensions.”

Kendall’s constitutional understandings gained a wider audience through the Dartmouth College English professor and *National Review* editor Jeffrey Hart, who adopted those understandings in his own journalistic writings on the Constitution and constitutional disputes in *National Review*, *Human Events*, and other popular movement outlets. Hart distinguished two

American constitutional traditions: In the first . . . the American system is conceived of as one based ultimately on the “deliberate sense” of the people. The Founders, consciously and with great ingenuity, designed a government in which “waves of popular enthusiasm” would find it exceedingly difficult . . . to bring about rapid and fundamental change . . . And the complex filter in the system of government they designed may be viewed as the functional equivalent of Burke’s “custom” and of the unwritten restraints of the “British Constitution. “[T]he other and rival American political tradition does not appeal to the “deliberate sense” of the people, but to a set of goals, posited as absolutes, which it claims to have discovered in certain key texts. The first is the “all men are created equal” clause of the Declaration of Independence, not in its original context, but as reinterpreted by the Gettysburg Address . . . Other key texts are Amendments I through X, especially the First and, of course, the “equal protection” clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

Elaborating upon Kendall, Hart explained that, in a Constitution designed structurally to implement the deliberate sense of the people, Congress was properly understood as the system’s preeminent branch. There were two basic ways to frustrate this design: to overdevelop the powers of either of the other two rival branches, the (Article I) president or the (Article III) courts. Modern liberals achieved their policy objectives by doing precisely this, which amounted to imposing their views against the deliberate sense of the American people. Jaffa’s Declarationist ideology threatened similar corruptions, beginning with the Article I President.¹⁰ The rival tradition, Hart observed, had “developed its own mythology, and, when not appealing

¹⁰ In his time, Jaffa joined his fellow conservatives in calling for judicial restraint. But I have argued in *Conservatives and the Constitution* that, in recent years, the Jaffa understandings are being increasingly adapted within conservative movement legal circles, including the Federalist Society. This raises the specter of the possibility that Hart’s warning about the hypertrophy of Article III might soon be an additional legacy of Jaffa’s influence, with the arrival of a highly aggressive, activist (Republican) federal judiciary that moves to reset the country to its proper natural law/natural right foundations.

to key sacred texts, invokes a series of quasi-messianic Great Presidents – Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Wilson, Roosevelt, Kennedy – each of whom, to quote Kendall again, ‘sees more deeply into the specifically American problem, which is posed by the ‘all men are created equal’ clause of the Declaration of Independence.’” By these lights, “America will build a New Jerusalem which will be a commonwealth of free and equal men . . . Through Him, through the Great President, we are to be reborn.” Hart understood this political (and executive) messianism to be an affront to the Constitution – and politically dangerous as well.

Amongst Hart’s complaints was that “the interpretation of these key texts by the avatars of the rival [Declaration] tradition is . . . completely unhistorical . . . Does the Declaration tell us that it is the task of government to bring about equality of condition, or even equality of opportunity? . . . The founders would have ridiculed either goal as preposterous.” Plainly, the Declaration stood simply, if importantly, for the proposition that “Men are equal . . . in their right to found and organize a government as they see fit.”

For Hart, the debate about whether the “deliberate sense” or “abstract theory” would prevail within conservative constitutional thought framed the central constitutional issues of his time: “Busing, school prayer, pornography – the current litmus test issues,” Hart insisted, “all seem to take their places within its parameters.” If, as seemed to be the case, the Supreme Court and the federal bureaucracy were now careering out of control, it was because they had spurned Kendall’s go-slow, consensus approach. Hart lamented that “[t]he greatest breaches in the defenses of the ‘deliberate sense’ conception of government have in fact most recently been made by the Supreme Court, and by the ukases handed down by executive agencies like HEW.”

Writing in neoconservative outlets, both Irving Kristol and the Martin Diamond also set themselves in opposition to Jaffa’s the redemptive moralism as the keystone of American

politics. Writing in significant part against the New Left and the counterculture of the 1960s, the neoconservative Kristol had been busy mounting a sustained defense of bourgeois values, and toward an interpretation of the American Revolution as a bourgeois revolution. The East Coast Straussian Martin Diamond joined Kristol in characterizing the Revolution in bourgeois, prosaic terms. Diamond's chief focus (unlike Kristol) was on founding era understandings of the Constitution, and the virtues of the original constitutional plan or design. Diamond emphasized constitutional structure and institutions rather than the foundational truths of the Declaration. He argued that the origins of the constitutional liberties of Americans arose in significant part from the regime's nature as a commercial republic.

Perhaps Jaffa's most engaged antagonists were libertarians like Frank Meyer and agrarian or neo-confederate traditionalists like M. E. Bradford, who had blamed Jaffa's hero Lincoln for having wrecked the Constitution. Observing that both Kendall's deliberate sense understanding and the abstract views of Jaffa and his West Coast acolytes had long pedigrees in American political thought, Frank Meyer found it odd that Jaffa clung so tenaciously to the conviction that his understanding was the only legitimate interpretation of the American constitutional tradition. Jaffa's relentless high-mindedness, moreover, was a menace to free government. Jaffa's "airy and cavalier lack of concern with how power is distributed," Meyer charged, "leaves him with no defenses, except hope, against the tendency of government to concentrate power and to ride roughshod over the individual. It fully explains his admiration of Jackson, Lincoln, et al." Meyer placed liberty, not equality, at the core of the country's constitutional tradition – and Jaffa's hero, Lincoln, in Meyer's calculus, was no friend of liberty. "Professor Jaffa, since he regards the division of power as irrelevant to the 'principle of a free constitution,' [in favor of the view that what is crucial is the recognition that all men have rights which no government should infringe]

does not begin to grasp the incalculable damage for which Lincoln is responsible,” Meyer protested:

Jaffa . . . chooses to base his critique of American slavery on the proposition that the American polity is in its essence dedicated to equality – and to center his vindication of Lincoln on Lincoln’s role as the champion of equality. Nothing . . . could be further from the truth . . . The freedom of the individual person from government, not the equality of individual persons, is the central theme of our constitutional arrangements . . . Freedom and equality are opposites.

While Jaffa’s Lincoln is the champion of equality (rightly understood), Meyer’s was “the creator of concentrated national power, the President who shattered the constitutional tension.” These two Lincolns, Meyer insisted, are “one and the same man.”

While Meyer wrote from a strong libertarian and anti-consolidationist/centralist/statist perspective, his movement compatriot M.E. “Mel” Bradford, a native Texan literature professor at the University of Dallas, wrote as an “an impenitent conservative Southerner.” Many of Bradford’s writings trained their sites on both Abraham Lincoln, and the movement scholar who was celebrating him most outspokenly, Harry Jaffa. Bradford presented President Lincoln in a very different light. Bradford described Lincoln as a moral zealot who, in the spirit of Oliver Cromwell, the French Revolutionary Jacobins, and the continental revolutionaries of 1848, sought to impose his moral vision on the United States through the power of an unconstitutionally unrestrained central state. Bradford traced the history of the North’s centralizing efforts, inflamed by “chiliastic moral imperatives,” to lay waste to the terms of the

original constitutional compact.

Bradford characterized Lincoln's touchstone, the Declaration of Independence, as the nation's "one serious flirtation with the millennial thing." The Declaration's legacy was made all the more damaging, he explained, through the influence of those like Jaffa who read it by the light of "Jacobin 'translations.'" Bradford criticized Jaffa's "misunderstanding of the Declaration as [conferring] a 'deferred promise' of equality," and the Civil War struggle as having culminated in what amounts to a "second founding." This interpretation of the Declaration and the War, Bradford explained, was "fraught with peril and carries with it the prospect of an endless series of turmoils and revolutions, all dedicated to the freshly discovered meanings of equality as a 'proposition' – a juggernaut . . . powerful enough to arm and enthrone any self-made Caesar we might imagine."

Bradford asserted that Lincoln, who was "very early, touched by a Bonapartist sense of destiny," imagined himself in precisely such a role. The danger of Lincoln's outsized sense of destiny was heightened by his religiosity, Bradford warned, since men who see themselves as "authorized from on High to reform the world into an imitation of themselves – and to lecture and dragoon all who might object" are frighteningly zealous: "[they] receive regular intimations of the Divine Will through prophets who arise from time to time to recall them to their holy mission."

The biblical element in Lincoln's rhetoric grew stronger as his political career progressed, Bradford observed. Lincoln's characteristic and, in Bradford's view, disingenuous method as a moralizer was to demonize his enemies while only grudgingly deigning to recognize their constitutional rights. The political implications of this method over the long term were dire because "should slavery be gone, some new infamy was bound to be discovered by the stern

examiners whose power depends upon a regularity in such ‘crusades.’” Bradford contended that there was, in truth, “no worship of the law whatsoever” in Lincoln’s political thought, “but instead devotion to perpetually exciting goals, always just beyond our reach.” As such, Lincoln was “an enemy of the ‘founding’” who became “a scripture in himself,” committed to “the attribution of his own opinions to an antinomian revelation of divine will.”

Lincoln, it was clear to Bradford, regarded himself as a great man, the oracle of a political religion – most famously articulated in his Peoria Speech – and the wellspring of a political theology that would eventually “replace Church with State.” In Lincoln’s “House Divided” speech, Bradford explained, the self-dramatizing Lincoln went so far as to cast himself in the role of Old Testament prophet. It was in this high-prophetic mode that he alluded to “the eternal struggle between these two principles – right and wrong – throughout the world.” At this point, “All that remained of his evolution,” Bradford observed, “was a claim to direct communication with the god of history, of which we hear a great deal once Lincoln got the crisis which he wanted.”

In his study of Lincoln’s political rhetoric, commenced under the tutelage of Eric Voegelin’s *The New Science of Politics*, Bradford limned Lincoln as a “backcountry philosophe, as ‘secularist intellectual’ and ‘rational, progressivist superman,’” a politician combining a “gnostic formula [with] a special neo-Puritan twist.” “For the stage to come according to [Lincoln’s] political eschatology [as set out in his address to the Springfield Young Men’s Lyceum (1838)] may augur either a final perfection or an apocalypse, a complete inversion of the fortunate American unfolding already accomplished. That which comes soon may be either the kingdom or the beast.” This Lincoln seeks “not preservation but change: radical alterations in the basis and organization of American society.”

Many, Bradford claimed, have misidentified Lincoln with the freedom of the southern Negro and have been misled by Lincoln's populist, Jacksonian posturing. By temperament, however, the real Lincoln was a maniacal, tax and- spend Whig, and an ideologist, "a promising young centralist" who saw government as the roaring engine for the advancement of his vision. Whigs like Lincoln "were uniformitarians to the core . . . Local feeling and variety were [their] enemies . . . They connected both with the passions; and passion forestalled the evolution of the Union which, in standard progressive fashion, they defined more by what it could be than by what it was or had been." "[T]he final Lincoln . . . [was] the worst . . . For by him the real is defined in terms of what is yet to come, and the meaning of the present lies only in its pointing thither. This posture, when linked to one of the regnant abstractions of modern politics," Bradford warned, "can have no other result than a totalitarian order."

In the Civil War's aftermath, the nation might have committed itself to a "second founding" that was "digestible – suited under certain circumstances to accommodation with the first." "Emancipation appeared to have changed nothing substantial in the basic confederal framework," Bradford concluded, "[n]either did it attempt any multiracial miracles." Unfortunately, however, for some, "the connection between blacks and American millennialism [only] intensified" in the postbellum United States, when "Equality (capital 'E')" was placed at the center of their political understandings. With the arrival of the Rights Revolution in the mid-twentieth century, the Civil War moment at last became "the Trojan Horse of our homegrown Jacobinism." Rights Revolution egalitarianism was founded upon an uncompromising denial of localism, "a hatred of plenitude . . . a denial of the variety of Creation, 'abolishing the constitution of being, with its origin in divine, transcendent being, and replacing it with a world-immanent order of being, the perfection of which lies in the realm of human action [and proceeds

from a human dream].” “Pure millennialism of the gnostic sort,” Bradford warned, “is . . . ever restless, never satisfied . . . [It] entails the fracturing of hard won communal bonds in the implementation of someone’s private version of the supernal good; and in a pluralistic society, implementation of such visions is usually perceived as moralistic aggression.”

“As the South has always recognized,” Bradford explained, “patronizing, ‘for-the-Negro’ millennialism has had its primary meaning and ultimate promise exposed in those other species of Utopian hope for which it broke trail . . . [I]t has been a stalking horse for objectives never able to command national assent – never except as they hid behind or within the . . . one ‘sacred’ cause.” When these are achieved, diversity, culture, and ultimately freedom are lost.

To insist upon the centrality to the American constitutional tradition of “Equality, with the capital ‘E,’” Bradford thundered, “is the antonym of every legitimate conservative principle.” “[T]here is no man equal to any other,” he unapologetically declared, “except perhaps in the special, and politically untranslatable, understanding of the Deity. Not intellectually or physically or economically or even morally . . . Such is, of course, the genuinely self-evident proposition.” The mistaken commitment to equality, Bradford warned, will lead ineluctably to a demand for the equality of condition, as advanced by an increasingly all-powerful Leviathan, a docile, manipulated populace under the control of an army of elites. Far from being conservative, this is nothing more than “the Old Liberalism hidden under a Union battle flag.”

Lincoln’s distorted understandings of the Declaration was bad enough. But Jaffa had only compounded Lincoln’s error through “his treatment of the second sentence of that document in abstraction from its whole: indeed, of the first part of that sentence in abstraction from its remainder, to say nothing of the larger text.” Jaffa, Bradford observed, “filters the rest of the Declaration (and later expressions of the American political faith) back and forth through

the measure of that sentence until he has (or so he imagines) achieved its baptism in the pure waters of higher law.” In doing so, he “sets up a false dilemma: we must be . . . ‘committed’ to Equality or we are ‘open to the relativism and historicism that is the theoretical ground of modern totalitarian regimes.” Only a firm commitment to that single phrase of the Declaration, Jaffa has oddly concluded, will save us from Hitler and Stalin.

“I agree with Professor Jaffa concerning the dangers of relativism,” Bradford wrote, “[a] Christian must.” But, all the same, “we must resist the tendency to thrust familiar contemporary pseudo-religious notions back into texts where they are unlikely to appear.” As a Straussian, Jaffa had insisted upon treating the “all men are created equal” clause “as one of Lincoln’s beloved Euclidian propositions.” Jaffa and his West Coast Straussian acolytes “have approached the task of explication as if the Declaration existed, *sui generis*, in a Platonic empyrean.” They have, in turn, treated the Founding and the Constitution the same way. But, in Bradford’s understanding, “the Declaration is not implicit in the Constitution except as it made possible free ratification by the independent states. In truth, many rights are secured under the Constitution that are not present in the Declaration, however it be construed.”

Apocalyptic Yearnings

One characteristic of Jaffa’s political thought -- and political temperament -- that Bradford clearly identified was its palpably apocalyptic cast. The West Coast Straussian school that Jaffa created and propagated begins with the thesis of that western civilization is under existential threat, and on the verge of imminent collapse. This was certainly not a new theme within the postwar conservative movement, which itself was forged during “the age of the crisis

of man.”¹¹ Jaffa’s central claim as a political theorist was that the indisputable cause of that collapse was the abandonment of Lincoln’s teaching concerning “the American proposition” set out in the crucial sentence of the country’s Declaration of Independence. For Jaffa’s students (and, while he was alive, Jaffa himself, in his journalistic writings), every loss of the contemporary culture war as defined by the social conservatives who came to constitute the contemporary Religious Right stands as yet another consequence of the corruptions wrought when the American people abandon the American proposition. By the early late twentieth and early twentieth century, the situation was so dire in this regard, that it was far from clear that western civilization would survive. At this point, while possibly still futile, only the most extreme measures would serve.

For a certain species of conservative, the flip side of radical pessimism was the possibility of radical hope -- for last-minute redemption. The Biblical structure of this understanding of the predicament is patent. Whatever his (many) flaws, what M.E. Bradford clearly identified was Jaffa’s yearning for the arrival of the Great Man of yore who would come to teach the Truth that would save -- and redeem -- his people. This cast Lincoln in the role of a Christ figure speaking the Gospel (or of a Moses bearing the Tablets). His messianic role, and purpose, was lead his people out of bondage. It was far from incidental to the spread of this quasi-religious imaginary that, aside from the elevated position it afforded Lincoln, it also happened to cast Leo Strauss -- and Harry Jaffa -- in the role of prophets, if not messiahs. And, indeed, the attribution of the status of prophets to these two movement philosophers was a commonplace on both the Straussian (and Christian) Right.

“Apocalypses position us at a rupture in time, at the edge of great transformations,”

¹¹ Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (2015). See also Edward Purcell, Jr., *The Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism and the Problem of Value* (1973).

Alison McQueen has noted in her study of the apocalyptic political imaginary in western political thought. One of its chief promises for those lamenting the state of the current world is that “Nothing will be the same again.”¹² The apocalyptic imaginary gives its adherents “a way to understand their current circumstances and envision a new world.” It offers “a world charged with meaning and at the edge of a cosmic transformation,” which “can be highly motivating.” The promise of a new, and better, world can, and in some cases, has, been effectively enlisted in the service of the highest ideals. But, for students of politics, at least, the apocalyptic imagination must be considered analytically independently of its moral aims and aspirations. Independent of those aims and aspirations, it is notable that the apocalyptic imaginary works through “[v]isions of end times” that traffic heavily in portents and symbols (as in Bible’s Book of Daniel and Revelations, as explicated by McQueen). “By presenting us with terrifying images of imminent scourges and doom,” she observes, “they aim to shake us from our complacency and give us the moral courage to act together in the name of justice,” from ending chattel slavery to confronting environmental catastrophe. Both “the power and potential danger of apocalypticism lie in its capacity to captivate the imagination.”¹³

Many of the canonical texts of the postwar conservative movement like Russell Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind*, Henry Hazlitt’s *Economics in One Lesson*, Barry Goldwater’s *Conscience of a Conservative*, and Milton Friedman’s *Capitalism and Freedom* were more or less sober tracts free of taint of apocalypticism. Other movement texts that are typically omitted from the canon, however, but which had considerable readerships on the postwar Right -- Hal Lindsay’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Tim LaHaye’s *Left Behind* series, William Luther Pierce’s *The Turner Diaries*, and Francis Schaeffer’s *A Christian Manifesto* -- are classic

¹² Alison McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* (Cambridge, 2018), 2.

¹³ McQueen, *Political Realism*, 13-14, 23, 43, 61-62.

manifestations of the apocalyptic political imaginary. It is easy enough to divide this body of thought into two camps: the works of serious scholarship taken to represent the intellectual Right, and the works of the “Alt” or “Radical.” But some of the classic texts on the list of serious works, like Hayek’s *Road to Serfdom*, James Burnham’s *Communism: The Struggle for the World* -- and Harry Jaffa’s *Crisis of the House Divided* -- plainly share elements of the apocalyptic imaginary that define the second category of work. Indeed, it might be more appropriate to consider them bridge works that serve to provide a common frame, and emotive base, for different elements of the modern -- and contemporary -- conservative movement.

Jaffa’s political imaginary is apocalyptic. It is, notably, apocalyptic about ending slavery long after slavery was actually eliminated in the United States. As such, Jaffa’s abolitionism is what I have called a “*vicarious abolitionism*.”¹⁴ It draws its moral authority from the presumptive moral clarity of the participants in events of nearly a century earlier. Jaffa’s *pret-a-porter* apocalypticism is on offer for contemporary political actors, whom are implicitly encouraged to borrow it, and apply it to contemporary issues.

“And the war came.” -- Jaffa’s epigraph to *A New Birth of Freedom*, Jaffa’s follow up to *Crisis of the House Divided*, borrowed, of course, from Lincoln’s *Second Inaugural Address*. We know what war Lincoln was referring to. What about Jaffa? Yes, the earlier Civil War. But also, it is strongly intimated, the new civil war brewing -- if, in fact, it is not already under way. Jaffa’s teachings are not needed to end slavery in America. But they have been aggressively enlisted as intellectual fodder for fighting the contemporary culture wars, in the wars against abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and, most comprehensively, against (positivist, secularist, relativist, historicist, and nihilist) progressivism.¹⁵ For the last, constitutional

¹⁴ Kersch, *Conservatives and the Constitution*.

¹⁵ The major centers for this work today are The Claremont Institute, Hillsdale College, and The Heritage

abandonment -- or, more specifically, the alleged abandonment of the Constitution's natural law foundations (by the lights of Jaffa's idiosyncratic Aristotelian (if not Thomistic) understanding of those foundations) -- has been presented as a catastrophe, bringing about an end of days. It is this catastrophe and last days vision that has been adduced as counsel for the supporting the presidency of Donald Trump.¹⁶ There will be no more "fiddling while Rome burns" (Strauss). "The time for empty talk is over. Now arrives the hour of action."¹⁷

Contemporary commentators have appropriately alluded to the Schmittian turn on the contemporary American Right, and its "emergency" politics as involving a claim of a state of exception.¹⁸ But, given its pervading Christian politics and imaginaries, the apocalyptic/messianic vantage point is probably more appropriate to the American context. After all, since the late 1970s, the contemporary conservative movement was remade by the modern Religious and, especially, Christian Right.

Ordinary politics, and indeed "politics" itself, as liberal democratic moderns understand it, entails what McQueen (following the convention) describes as "political realism." In some sense this involves an almost quotidian forsaking of ideals in a way that implicitly accepts the tragic as inherent in the political. Conflict, trimming, compromise, contradiction, incoherence, making peace and moving on -- are all constitutive of this sort of "realistic" politics.

An apocalyptic politics spurns a "realistic" politics involving perpetual conflict and irresolution. Its animating hope is "for a final escape from conflict," and, in the wake of that deliverance, for "the arrival of a permanent peace." In its place it "offer[s] a vision of the end

Foundation. As Jack Goldsmith has noted (without linking it to the intellectual sources I have adduced here), it is also starting to transform the tenor of the meetings and events of The Federalist Society. Jack Goldsmith, "The Conservatives and the Court," *Liberties* (Winter 2021).

¹⁶ Most prominently, in Jaffa student Michael Anton's "Flight 93 Election" in the *Claremont Review of Books*.

¹⁷ Strauss; Trump Inaugural Address (2017).

¹⁸ See recent writings by Sanford Levinson.

that brings retrospective coherence to political events that seem threatening, inexplicable, and contingent.” After the final showdown “difference, conflict, and moral complexity will be eliminated.” “With the restoration of divine order on earth, not only is evil abolished, but so too are all the previous markers of difference.” “God’s final assertion of earthly sovereignty destroys all the boundaries, differences, conflicts, and moral complexity that define the political world.” As such, the politics of the final showdown between good and evil “offer[s] their audiences not only the promise of a world without persecution but also a seductive vision of a world without politics.”¹⁹

West Coast Straussianism “is a political theodicy.” Its project is to “situate contemporary political circumstances” -- including the ascendancy of Donald Trump to the White House -- “within a sacred worldview, thereby endowing them with divine significance.” Following the structure of apocalyptic visions dating at least from the Book of Revelations, Jaffa’s West Coast Straussian vision has offered to contemporary conservatives a narrative involving a progression from a persecution, to the punishment of persecutors, and, finally, to the salvation of the persecuted. By the lights of the apocalyptic imaginary, the end of the world is always imminent,” but, in a moment of rupture, that cataclysm “brings and end to some real or perceived evil,” and introduces a great revelation. As such, “[s]uffering becomes the narrative prelude to redemption and renewal.” The process by which “divine redemption and universal vindication” unfolds “promises not only an end to conflict, which is the end of politics, which, in turn, is the end of history.”

While Strauss himself frequently railed against historicism, and called for an unwavering attention to the timeless and eternal, the West Coast iteration propounded by Jaffa is, in a certain

¹⁹ McQueen, *Political Realism*, 7, 42.

sense, profoundly temporal. It posits history as having a direction. As in the Bible, its promise -- the promise ultimately won, is the final demonstration of God's sovereignty over history itself. With the arrival of the Messiah, "First Things"²⁰ become Last Things ... and the newly redeemed world begins.²¹

Conclusion

Almost all accounts of Leo Strauss as scholar and teacher celebrate his prodigious learning. Few focus on the depth of his understanding of the politics and people of his adopted country, the United States, about which he wrote next to nothing. One of Strauss's chief preoccupations was "the political-theological problem," or the place in politics of what Straussians came to call "revealed religion." One of the paradigm's orienting tropes is the imperative of proper relations in a well-ordered polity between "Athens" and "Jerusalem," or, put otherwise, between Reason and Revelation. It is not clear how much Strauss knew or understood of the nature and varieties of "revealed Religion" in American life and history. I have seen little evidence that Strauss was in any way conversant with American evangelical, fundamentalist, and charismatic Christianity, and or with historical role and place those forms of religiosity have played in American public life (by contrast, I think, we can presume Strauss's familiarity with Catholic theology). The neo-confederate -- and thus highly "problematic" Mel Bradford, on the other hand, by virtue of his deep southern roots was likely quite conversant with, and sensitive to, the varieties of American religious enthusiasm, which, unlike Jaffa (a New York City Jew), he understood as a reality, not as a metaphysical "proposition." Presumably

²⁰ Hadley Arkes, *First Things; First Things* (<https://www.firstthings.com/>).

²¹ McQueen, *Political Realism*, 23, 26-29, 37, 41, 57-59.

quite familiar with America's (and the American South's) history with religious zeal and enthusiasm -- camp meetings, hellfire sermons, demagogic men of the cloth, fainting, swooning, speaking in tongues, Biblical literalism, and end-of-days prophecies²² -- Bradford recognized the character and likely appeal of Jaffa's propositionalist Lincoln who had committed himself to the Word, to Right over Wrong, Good versus Evil, and stood ready to take the fight to the country, to save America's soul, as it teetered on the precipice of eternal damnation.

There were, to be sure, more sober theological paths to roughly the same end. As I discussed in *Conservatives and the Constitution*, something very similar to Jaffa's propositionalist reading of the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln, and natural law was offered by Father John Courtney Murray, SJ in *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (1960) at about the exact same time Jaffa published *Crisis of the House Divided*. (1959).²³ There, Murray's very similar argument was set out in a notably different, and decidedly non-apocalyptic, spirit. A Thomist theologian, and one of the driving forces behind the Catholic Church's Vatican II reforms, Murray set out his argument concerning the American Proposition not in the spirit of negation, and fiery denunciation and warning, but in the spirit of assent and embrace, of the argument that good Catholics could be good Americans -- could assent the philosophy of the Declaration and Lincoln (properly understood) -- at the time that he was working towards a (partial, but significant) embrace of modernism by the Church (and, not incidentally, the election of the U.S.'s first Roman Catholic president). For their part, Jaffa's "East Coast Straussian" antagonists like Walter Berns, Martin Diamond, and others, as noted above, while certainly not rejecting the principles of the Declaration and Lincoln, were more inclined to situate them within an ongoing liberal tradition that placed more weight on the

²² See generally Morone, *Hellfire Nation*; Gilbert Seldes, *The Stammering Century*.

²³ Kersch, *Conservatives and the Constitution*.

virtues of accommodation, compromise, and adjustment -- of the art of politics in a liberal polity -- than on pronouncements of heresy and eternal damnation.

Ever since the publication of *Crisis of the House Divided*, Jaffa's "teaching" on the Declaration and Lincoln assumed a place on the map as one of the tributaries of thought that informed the worldview of the modern conservative movement, both its intellectually and politically. It has been on offer ever since, whether in sophisticated or popular form, to the groups that came to coalesce to form the contemporary American Right. While around since the late 1950s, Jaffa's writings only became central to the movement with the coalescing of the contemporary Religious Right in the late 1970s into the 1980s. There, it benefited from considerable synergies that Jaffa's West Coast teaching had with the political theories and imaginaries of Right Wing Evangelical and Fundamentalist Protestantism and (in complicated ways) with both the "Americanist" Catholics who followed Murray and the Traditionalist-onto-Ultramontane Catholics who rejected Americanism as a Catholic heresy. It is no small part because of Jaffa that the modern conservative movement has put a superintending commitment to the principles of the Declaration and a hero worship of Lincoln -- *persona non grata*, e.g., in Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* (1953), where Lincoln is absent from Kirk's historical pantheon of American conservatives. And it is in no small part because of Jaffa that the modern conservative movement -- especially its Religious Right -- has increasingly looked to deliverance from a messianic leader who would fight the last-ditch battle to restore the country to its Natural Law foundations, redeeming it from depravity, and ushering in a new day for the American nation.

As Alison McQueen has observed, the presumption of political quietism when one is peddling civilizational catastrophe and apocalypse "assumes an audience capable of accepting

that they are living through a period of profound crisis and that their political sovereign is the chaotic antithesis of the divine order.” Such quietism seems unlikely both in the American context generally, but especially in the content of an ascendant Christian Right, which, since Reagan, has taken significant control of one of the major political parties. Donald Trump’s own demagogic and apocalyptic rhetoric was designed to provoke and unleash precisely this “base” political constituency. By implicitly promising the Christian Right everything they had ever wanted, immediately, and by making that promise credible by demonstrating repeatedly that he would fight for his base and their political objectives unhindered by scruple, norms, or law, Trump sought to unleash “apocalyptic enthusiasm” of his would-be voters. As McQueen notes, of course, once that happens, it can be exceedingly difficult to control. Its “ambiguous treatment of violence,” moreover, “treads a fine line between catharsis and the inflammatory.” It can strongly conduce to political violence and insurrection.²⁴ In conjunction with similar visions propounded by radical Evangelical, Fundamentalist, Charismatic, and Catholic Right Christians, Jaffa’s own vision, centered on constitutional catastrophe, a national End of Days, and Lincoln as the Savior President, was among the principal authors of the “semiotic arousal” that produced the Trump presidency, and the deadly attack on the Capitol and the constitutional processes that provide for the peaceful transfer of political power.²⁵

In what nows seems an ill-timed 2018 Foreword to a new edition of Jaffa’s *A New Birth of Freedom*, the Trumpist Lincoln historian Allan Guelzo offered a clear example to those about to dive into Jaffa’s second set of Lincoln “teachings” of what exactly Jaffa meant substantively when he spoke of the equality of natural rights as the rock-solid foundation of his (and Lincoln’s, and America’s) constitutional and political thought. Guelzo immediately honed in on Jaffa’s

²⁴ McQueen, *Political Realism*, 42-44.

²⁵ McQueen, *Political Realism*, 61.

teaching concerning the election of 1860, and the anti-constitutional rebellion that it had unleashed. “The Civil War,” Jaffa had reminded his readers that “was fundamentally an attempt to nullify the operation of an election, and elections are the fundamental means by which equal citizens in a republic make their consent as the governed known.” Celebrating the profundity of Jaffa’s chapter on the peaceful constitutional transfer of power from Adams to Jefferson in the Election of 1800, Guelzo recounted Jaffa’s contention that, as the author of *The Summary of the Rights of British America* (1774) and *The Declaration of Independence* (1776), Jefferson’s great wisdom was to explicate the foundations “of a political order in which equal citizens agree, on the basis of that equality, to abide by the conclusions of elections.”²⁶

That two years later, not only would Jaffa-ites be the most prominent group of constitutional scholars refusing “to abide by the conclusions of elections,” but also, before long, a “Golden Trump” would be hoisted at the annual Conservative Political Action Committee (CPAC) meeting, is a testament to the incoherence, inaptness, and perils of the Messianic (or Caesarist) executive celebrated in the teachings of Harry V. Jaffa and his students. The problem is not only one of “modern” “progressive” presidents, but of conservative ones too. On this issue, there is no longer any moral or constitutional high ground -- if there ever was. Even if we accept the conservative critique of the modern Caesarist presidency as explicated by scholars like Zentner, post-Trump, it is a tale of Messiah versus Messiah, and Caesar versus Caesar.

²⁶ Allen C. Guelzo, “Foreword,” Jaffa, *New Birth of Freedom*, xviii-ix.