

>> Peter Robinson: Welcome, to Uncommon Knowledge, I'm Peter Robinson. Be sure to follow us by the way at twitter.com/uncknowledge. That's twitter.com/uncknowledge. Now, a distinguish fellow of the Claremont Institute, Dr. Harry Jaffa, majored in English at Yale, took his doctorate at the new school for social research then studied with the legendary political philosopher Leo Strauss. In 1959, Dr. Jaffa published *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates*. On this book, journalist Andrew Ferguson, "*Crisis of the House Divided* is a book that will never die. A genuine landmark in American thought. It's the greatest Lincoln book ever. 2009, this year marks the 200th birth--200 years since the birth of Abraham Lincoln and the 50th year since the publication of *Crisis of the House Divided*. I am holding the University of Chicago Press' 50th anniversary edition. Professor Harry Jaffa, thank you.

>> Harry Jaffa: You're welcome.

>> Peter Robinson: Segment 1. Lincoln. At Yale, during the 1930s, you feel in love with William Shakespeare so profoundly that it was your plan to write a history of Elizabethan drama. Instead--

>> Harry Jaffa: Where did you hear that?

>> Peter Robinson: I've been reading up on you.

>> Harry Jaffa: Okay.

>> Peter Robinson: I've been reading up on you. Instead, instead Abraham Lincoln, Steven A. Douglas, and the debates of 1858, what happened, that is from Shakespeare to Lincoln?

>> Harry Jaffa: What happened is that I think it contributed as much to Shakespeare studies that I have the Lincoln studies. I have--my essay on the first scene in *King Lear* is a landmark work in Shakespearian criticism. And in addition to that I wrote a long essay on *Measure for Measure* and another essay on *The Unity of Tragedy, Comedy, and History in Shakespeare* which is a survey of the Shakespearean universe. Most recently, I published a long essay on *Macbeth* which happens to be Lincoln's favorite play.

>> Peter Robinson: Alright. So Shakespeare never fell out of the long and productive life of Harry Jaffa.

>> Harry Jaffa: Right, and my work on Shakespeare is not as well known but I think it's just as important.

>> Peter Robinson: How did you come to Lincoln?

>> Harry Jaffa: That is kind of hard to explain. I recently remembered that when I was a boy, when I was 8 or 9 years old when my parents decorated this big house [inaudible] which they rented in 1925. My mother put a sampler on my wall which said, "stand with anybody who stands right, stand with him when he is right and part from them when he goes wrong" which I later realized came from the Peoria speech. As far as I know it made no impression whatever on me as a boy.

>> Peter Robinson: Lincoln in Peoria in 1854?

>> Harry Jaffa: Right. But that's the foundational speech of Lincoln's whole career. But--

>> Peter Robinson: And you were raised in the northeast, in--

>> Harry Jaffa: I grew in Lawrence, Long Island.

>> Peter Robinson: Right.

>> Harry Jaffa: That's right. I graduated from Lawrence High School in 1935.

>> Peter Robinson: So there was a sampler on your wall with unbeknownst to you a quotation from Abraham Lincoln.

>> Harry Jaffa: Right.

>> Peter Robinson: My father was born a year after you were. And he used to tell me that when he was boy on the 4th of July parade in his hometown, there were still civil war veterans marching. Was Lincoln, was the civil war at all a felt presence in your own boyhood?

>> Harry Jaffa: No.

>> Peter Robinson: Not at all.

>> Harry Jaffa: No. But in 1946 I was on a used bookstore on Fourth Avenue in New York when I was a graduate student at New School when I was studying with Strauss, and I happen to pick up the copy of the Lincoln-Douglas debates. It was my custom in those days if I found a book in a bookstore that I like I come back each day to read some more of it 'cause I didn't have any money, but I somehow scraped up 5 dollars to pay for this copy of the Lincoln-Douglas debates. I have taken no courses of American history in either the undergraduate or the graduate student. And, but I fell in love with the debates just because it was a wonderful reading and it occurred to me.

>> Peter Robinson: So was the language--the first point of contact was the--like the power of the language?

>> Harry Jaffa: Well not. I saw that there was something classical. I was studying with Straus and I didn't see this right away but I did after awhile that the issue between Lincoln and Douglas was not similar to but identical to the difference between Socrates and Thrasymachus in the first book of the Republic. This question of whether or not the people make the moral law or the moral law makes the people. Thrasymachus says justice is the interest of the stronger which in a democracy means justice is whatever the demos, the many were. In a tyranny it's whatever the tyrant wants to do and in oligarch it's whatever the rich want to do but there was no idea of any law controlling the decision of the people who made these decisions. Steven A. Douglas' position was that he'd let the people rule.

>> Peter Robinson: Segment 2. The Debates. 1858, Steven A. Douglas is the sitting senator from Illinois. He's running, standing for reelection for a third term. Abraham Lincoln challenges him and they agree to debate in seven towns in Illinois. Why did Douglas an immensely important figure on the national stage already gain to appear with Abraham Lincoln a much lesser known figure?

>> Harry Jaffa: The explanation is very simple Lincoln used to go to Douglas' meetings and when Douglas finished speaking he'd get up and tell the audience to come back in half an hour and you can listen to me. And the price that Douglas paid, that he made Lincoln pay was that if they have the joint debates then Lincoln would no more come to Douglas' long meetings. So Lincoln in effect blackmailed Douglas into the joint debates.

>> Peter Robinson: Now from August to October, Lincoln and Douglas appear in Ottawa. These are towns in, these are counties, I don't know whether they were county seats but they're like seven towns in seven different congressional districts in Illinois: Ottawa, Freeport, Jonesboro, Charleston, Galesburg, Quincy, and Alton.

>> Harry Jaffa: Right.

>> Peter Robinson: What kinds of audiences, who were the people who would attend those debates.

>> Harry Jaffa: Mostly farmers because it was a farming community. But any, but you have to realize that politics was a much more important part of everybody's life and not merely because of the vitality of slavery question, but because there was no, there were no theaters, there were no radios, there was no television, and even in the news, there were a lot of newspapers but they have limited circulation and most of them aren't newspapers anyway, they were journals of opinion.

>> Peter Robinson: And the format of the debate was, of each debate?

>> Harry Jaffa: Each--the first speaker spoke for 30 minutes, for an hour. The second speaker spoke for an hour and a half and then the third or in other words your first speaker closed with 30 minutes.

>> Peter Robinson: So that's 3 hours of debate to which these farm folks who'd driven in from the countryside would--

>> Harry Jaffa: Yeah, but that was not much because when people are made to go all this trouble to go to a political rally, they wanted their money's worth. Many of the individual meetings that Lincoln and Douglas had with their own supporters were the last 3 hours. That was unusual.

>> Peter Robinson: Alright. From the Crisis of the House Divided I'm quoting you. "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." The character of the beliefs in which the souls of men were to abide, what beliefs and in what sense do you mean to suggest that souls could abide in beliefs?

>> Harry Jaffa: Well, first one must understand what is unique about the American history and what is the basis in which they call American exceptionalism. Like recently President Obama thought that--the British thought they were exceptional, the Germans think they're exceptional. We have no idea of what

American exceptionalism really meant. What it meant was that the American people in declaring their independence, it's so not on the basis of unique rights or privileges or qualities that they had but on the basis of rights which they shared with all men everywhere. To give you contrast, in the Bible the land of Canaan and this promise--the Jewish God promises to the Jewish people and they will have exclusive rights.

>> Peter Robinson: Right.

>> Harry Jaffa: There was nothing exclusive about the rights that the Americans claim for themselves. They were rights which they shared with all men everywhere. And this is not merely in the declaration of independence but in the declaration of the causes and necessity of taking up arms. Almost exactly 1 year before the declaration of independence the American Congress declared to the world that it was impossible to believe, no rational president could believe that God made some part of the human race an exclusive property of another part of the human race.

>> Peter Robinson: Segment 3. On to the specific question of slave--the specific political context of those debates in 1858. Give me a layman's explanation, an explanation for a layman of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854.

>> Harry Jaffa: The Missouri Compromise of 1820 resulted in Missouri coming in as a slave state, then came in as a free state but in all the remaining Louisiana territory--territory acquired from France under the name of Louisiana, north of the southern boundary of Missouri, 3630, all the remaining territory would be forever free. That remained, that put an end to any question as to slavery which the American people had to decide. Each slave state went their way, the free states went their way, but they have nothing to quarrel about because it was understood and agreed to by Lincoln and the republican at the control of their domestic institutions whereas exclusively the province of the state. A federal government had no jurisdiction over slavery in the slave states. So there was nothing for the American people to decide about slavery until the Mexican War. In the Mexican War people would seldom realize what a vast change that was. United States took over 60 percent of the land area of Mexico and increased the land area of the United States by 40 percent. The question as to what states that would be formed out of this vast territory, what would be its status as the slavery became focal point of political and moral concern of the American people. Now one of the important things to understand and I don't think anybody else has articulated this, let me say, as well as I have done. With the repeal of the Missouri Compromise which Douglas was in charge of, he was chairman of the committee on territories. He wrote the Kansas-Nebraska Bill. In order to get southern support for the bill he repealed the Missouri Compromise restriction on slavery. His reasons for this was probably he wanted to get the northern route for the transcontinental railroad through Chicago northern route. That was he owned property there that was his constituency. And to get the southern state to give up their claims for the southern route eventually [inaudible] with the Southern Pacific and the Northern Pacific but there is only resources for the Northern Pacific then. At that time, Douglas was looked upon by the anti-slavery movement as the incarnation of evil. He was called the--he was the antichrist to the--the anti-slavery movement with then Douglas in 1854 as the antichrist.

>> Peter Robinson: In 18--because he repealed?

>> Harry Jaffa: Yes.

>> Peter Robinson: The Missouri Compromise was settled, agreement came on stock.

>> Harry Jaffa: Right.

>> Peter Robinson: And then the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 which he also engineered, correct.

>> Harry Jaffa: That was--The repeal of Missouri Compromise was part of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854.

>> Peter Robinson: Segment 4. The house divided. Prior to the debates, Lincoln accepts the republican nomination for the senate in Springfield in June 16th, Lincoln's speech from which you derive the title of the house divided. Lincoln states "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the union to be dissolved. I do not expect the house to fall, but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other." Now, on the face of it why was that it's beautifully written but you have all of American history up to that point suggesting that one way or another slavery can be contained. We have a new crisis here in the Kansas-Nebraska moment when the question of popular sovereignty that these both, these states could come enslaved or they could come in free but you have all of the American history where the slave trade has been abolished. Slavery has been successfully contained and made a distinctively southern institution. Why is he right about that?

>> Harry Jaffa: Well in the first place slavery has not been contained. This is the part that is hard to understand. What you just said about slavery being sort of on a way out that was the dominant historical view of the debates of the civil war before I came on this thing. And, but if you look at the reality of the Dred Scott decision you'll find that the principle argument of the chief justice about slavery was that that the right to own slaves is expressly affirmed in the constitution, that's what Taney said and that what's the southerners all believe although there is not a word of truth in it but they believed it because it was--

>> Peter Robinson: Dred Scott was 1857.

>> Harry Jaffa: Just before the--and the--according to the chief justice the right to own slaves is expressly affirmed in the constitution but Article 4 of the constitution says that this constitution and the laws pursuant thereof shall be the supreme ruler of the land. Anything in any constitution, state constitutional law to the contrary notwithstanding. Now, you put those statements together and slavery is lawful in every state of the union.

>> Peter Robinson: Suddenly you have the institution far from gradually withering. It becomes extremely aggressive and expensive.

>> Harry Jaffa: Right, and now Douglas accepted the Taney's decision but he tried to show that Taney's pronouncement was merely abstract and that in fact in any territory the slave owner could not--people couldn't have slavery in the state of Kansas unless the local legislature gave them the laws avoiding it, which is not true for one thing but in any case he--Douglas was trying to do it both ways you see.

>> Peter Robinson: [Inaudible]

>> Harry Jaffa: And Lincoln, Lincoln's whole campaign was to show that if Douglas, if Taney decision was right then slavery in fact was national and it was--the Supreme Court only decided that slavery was necessary in Kansas. But the logic of their argument implied as well of the states although they didn't rule specifically on states. But Lincoln felt that unless the Dred Scott was itself rejected that slavery would become lawful in all of the states. And it does happen that in the first of the joint debates, the Ottawa debate, Lincoln spent about half an hour reading from a speech that Douglas had given 3 months earlier in which Douglas denounced the Washington Union which meant President Buchanan with saying that slavery was already lawful in the free states. And that's the thing that ultimately destroyed Douglas.

>> Peter Robinson: Segment 5 here. I'm quoting again from Crisis of the House Divided. This maybe in this entire magnificent work published 50 years ago. This maybe the most importance sentence in my opinion. Ready?

>> Harry Jaffa: Okay.

>> Peter Robinson: Lincoln's interpretation, "Lincoln's interpretation of the phrase from the declaration 'all men are created equal' transforms that proposition from a norm which prescribes what civil society ought not to be, which you argue was in the declaration, into a transcendental affirmation of what civil society ought to be." Explain that.

>> Harry Jaffa: Well, it's really explained in the New Birth of Freedom.

>> Peter Robinson: That's our next program.

>> Harry Jaffa: Right.

>> Peter Robinson: But Lincoln, well let me put it this way then. Political philosopher Michael Zuckert writes this of you. Harry Jaffa holds "that Lincoln corrected the work of the founders. Indeed Jaffa presents Lincoln as the statesman, poet, philosopher, who put the nation on a sounder putting than the founders themselves had left it." How do you plead?

>> Harry Jaffa: Guilty.

>> Peter Robinson: Guilty, and how did Lincoln do that?

>> Harry Jaffa: Well, when I say guilty, I think that in Crisis of the House Divided I did look upon Jefferson, and Madison, and Hamilton, and the others and Washington as basically creatures of modern philosophy which ultimately leads to relativism and nihilism and that Lincoln had resisted that. I in the 40 years that separates the two books, I came to--

>> Peter Robinson: Crisis of the House Divided and the New Birth of Freedom which you published in 2000.

>> Harry Jaffa: That the founding itself was classical and I have lots of examples of the classicism of the founders. One of my main documents is--well there's a couple. One is George Washington's inaugural speech in which he said that the principles of public--foundations of public policy should be laid in the immutable principles of private morality since there is no truth more firmly established in the entire economy of nature than the indissoluble union of virtue and happiness. Aristotle [inaudible] differently about it. So, this is not modern philosophy, this is classical philosophy. So from--

>> Peter Robinson: And--

>> Harry Jaffa: Wait a minute.

>> Peter Robinson: Go ahead.

>> Harry Jaffa: In Washington, when Washington said the indissoluble union of virtue and happiness that meant the pursuit of happiness in the declaration of independence meant the pursuit of virtue. My friends and former friends, the east and southeast they think the pursuit of happiness is idiosyncratic radical individualism.

>> Peter Robinson: Licensed.

>> Harry Jaffa: But Washington said no. And Jefferson had the same view.

>> Peter Robinson: So in Jefferson, Lincoln, Washington, what makes them classical is the notion that there is something outside and above some objective--Aquinas would have called it the ground of being. There is some objective reality to which even popular sovereignty--

>> Harry Jaffa: Is subject.

>> Peter Robinson: --is subject.

>> Harry Jaffa: Absolutely.

>> Peter Robinson: And must aspire. The notion of individual--radical individualism, license, pursuit of happiness means 500 channels on the cable television, that's not so. The pursuit of happiness means the pursuit of virtue, the ability to--the freedom to conform one's self to ideals, to virtue. I'm fumbling around but I'm looking--

>> Harry Jaffa: If you take the question of the popular sovereignty, in a letter that Jefferson wrote to I forget the man who's chief justice of Virginia. They both hated Jefferson and a lot of things that but Jefferson said the principals of the constitution, the ultimate source for the principles of the constitution are the people or mass. They alone are subject to nothing but the moral law. People, the moral law makes the people. The people do not make the moral law. A Nazi people is not a people in the meaning of the declaration unless there's a recognition of an objective basis for morality then there cannot be any true morality--

>> Peter Robinson: So, when Lincoln--

>> Harry Jaffa: --or a true democracy.

>> Peter Robinson: When Lincoln uses biblical language, the house divided, which of course is a paraphrase from the Gospel of Saint Matthew and much of his language seems, the very rhythms of it seem rooted in the book Bible. He's not simply reaching for beautiful language, he's actually reaching into this kind of top root of objective reality, natural law. I'm fumbling here but is that correct?

>> Harry Jaffa: Yeah, but almost everything that Lincoln--great statements of Lincoln, most of them are reviving and rephrasing things that he got from Jefferson. In the notes on Virginia, Jefferson says that [inaudible] will the liberties of our people be secure when we have abolished their only sure foundation, the belief that they are the gift of God and may not be violated but with his wrath. And that's followed by I tremble for my country when I remember that God is just. Lincoln's Second Inaugural, it was all there.

>> Peter Robinson: Dr. Harry Jaffa, the 50th anniversary of the publication of this magnificent book Crisis of the House Divided, thank you for joining us. For Uncommon Knowledge and the Hoover Institution, I'm Peter Robinson.