

Interview with Walter Berns

October 31, 2013

Walter Berns: [in progress] —anti-Straussian people.

Stephen Gregory: This is an honest interest. Since we started our own website in which we have the audio files put up, we have gotten emails of gratitude from Colombia, and South America, different countries in Eastern Europe.

WB: Really?

SG: From scholars in Germany, and Italy, and Spain. Strauss: quality tells [laughter], and so—

WB: Well, Allan Bloom said that, and it's—

SG: I mean, there are—certainly there is a very lively anti-Straussian opinion in the American academy. It's not healthy for a young graduate student to be identified as a Straussian, that's still true. But it's also true now that you have scholars in Germany, Italy, Spain, France who take Strauss very seriously, and they're studying him, publishing books about him, holding conferences on him—in Poland.

WB: Oh my God.

SG: And so, and in the United States there is a kind of backhanded respect being shown to Strauss. When Christopher Nadon¹ did his dissertation on Xenophon's *Cyrus*, one of the things he found was that classicists were quoting—classicists were using Strauss's ideas, but they would never cite him, so they would cite enemies of Strauss. They would cite all kinds of minor classicists, but they would be incorporating Strauss's interpretation into their own interpretation but they would never acknowledge it. So in the U.S., things are changing but it's not as honest or rapid as one might like.

WB: Do you happen to know what happened to Chris Bruell² now? I'm talking about Xenophon.

SG: He has moved to New Mexico. He and his wife have moved to New Mexico—Santa Fe, where David Bolotin³ is, and they are working on some type of project together.

¹ Christopher Nadon is associate professor of government at Claremont McKenna College. He is author of *Xenophon's Prince: Republic and Empire in Xenophon's Cyropaedia* (University of California Press, 2001).

² Christopher Bruell: see "People Mentioned in the Interviews" [hereafter "People"].

³ David Bolotin: tutor at St. John's College Santa Fe. He taught at St. John's College Annapolis from 1974 to 1982.

WB: He and David?

SG: Yes.

WB: Your mentioning Xenophon reminded me, because he and I read the *Cyropaedia* with Bloom when I was a professor and Chris was a student, of course. We did this on a Saturday afternoon or something like that. Well, okay.

SG: Your first book was on the First Amendment?⁴

WB: Yap.⁵

SG: Was that, did that grow out of a dissertation?

WB: Yap.

SG: Who was your advisor?

WB: Well, Bob Horn,⁶ and Strauss was on the committee.

SG: I see.

WB: And Herman Pritchett,⁷ I presume, was on the committee too.

SG: How did you first get to know Strauss? How did you first hear of him?

WB: Well, I came to the University of Chicago without knowing anything about Leo Strauss, probably never having heard his name. I was in the class with Bob Goldwin,⁸ among others. In fact, it was a very good class, with people like Herb Storing⁹ in it. And Goldwin asked me whether I had—he said something to the effect that I was not in a Strauss class. And I indicated that yes, I'd probably take him next quarter or something like that. Some foolish remark. Anyway, Bob Goldwin knew him because Bob had the connection with St. John's. And then of course I did take a course with Strauss the next quarter; and the next quarter, and the next quarter, and so forth. So that's the beginning.

SG: And what year was this?

⁴ *Freedom, Virtue, and the First Amendment* (Greenwood Publishing Co., 1970).

⁵ Berns clearly did not say “yeah,” or “yup,” or “yah.” At the recommendation of Irene Berns, we have chosen “yap” and apologize if it is distracting to the reader.

⁶ Robert Horn: see “People.”

⁷ Herman Pritchett: see “People.”

⁸ Robert Goldwin: see “People.”

⁹ Herbert J. Storing: see “People.”

WB: Well, this would have been 1950, '51, something like that. My beginning.

SG: Strauss arrived at Chicago, I believe, in 1949.

WB: Yap.

SG: So this was—he was still finding his way around campus.

WB: I would imagine so, yap. As I said, I had never heard of him, but Bob had because of the connection with St. John's.

SG: What connection with St. John's would have let him know about Strauss? Because Strauss had not taught at St. John's yet.

WB: Strauss had all kinds of connections with St. John's, so that people at St. John's would have talked about him when Bob Goldwin was a student at St. John's.

SG: Oh, Jacob Klein¹⁰ and—

WB: Jacob, primarily Jacob Klein.

SG: Right, right. I understand.

WB: Well, that's my beginning, of course.

SG: Okay. So in 1950 or '51 you were in a class with Bob Goldwin and he said: Well, you should be in a class with this guy Strauss.

WB: Yes.

SG: You said okay, I'll get around to that.

WB: I'll get around to that next quarter, and I did. I mentioned that because it's such a stupid statement: I'll take him next quarter. [Laughter] Well, in a sense that was one's attitude toward professors; that is to say, you know, I had had the usual beginning of an undergraduate education, and I suspect even in the case of political theory, one expected to get everything from a professor in one semester; I'll take him next semester and that will be it. And the absurdity of that of course in this case of Strauss only came to me after I first got into the seminar with Strauss.

SG: So, what was the first course on?

WB: I think it was a discourse. A discourse. On Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*.

¹⁰ Jacob Klein: see "People."

SG: What impression did he—do you remember your first impression of him?

WB: I think so, yes. He was unlike any professor I ever had, and he conveyed—I guess he conveyed the seriousness of this subject. I'd had previous experience with professors in political theory teaching this that and the other thing. More or less: Plato was this; Aristotle taught that; the next guy taught, so on; and they all disagreed with each other, and now we're in this happy condition of living in a liberal democracy and we have nothing to worry about because our interest in these old people [is] historical interest only, something to talk about, maybe, but we can learn nothing from them. Well, one was quickly dispelled of that notion immediately with Strauss. One realized the seriousness of the subject, the importance of the subject. And of course, in due course one came to realize that Strauss, who's probably the best living defender of liberal democracy but also at the same time, like Tocqueville, critical and able to see the difficulties and the weaknesses.

I think I first became aware of that when Strauss lectured and gave his *Natural Right and History* lectures at Chicago. When he mentioned the attacks on natural right from certain Germans, as I recall, and one came into contact for the first time with some serious people in Europe who had some very serious things to say about natural right, and specifically the natural rights of the Declaration of Independence. And one became aware of the fact that the basis of the United States is to be found in the Declaration, and one has to pay serious attention to what the Declaration said, and perhaps be aware of the difficulties of that statement of natural rights.

And this guy in passing likened Strauss to Tocqueville. And I assume you know what I meant: Here's Tocqueville writing about democracy in America and he's really a great friend of democracy in America but *also* out of friendship, and then of course that was true in Strauss's case too: out of friendship, he talks about the weaknesses. And one became aware of that thanks to Strauss.

SG: So this impression of Strauss as a great friend of liberal democracy, this was something you formed early on, you think?

WB: Oh, sure. And well, it was confirmed the next year, in 1952 when he asked me to accompany him to the local precinct because he wanted to register to vote in the presidential election in 1952. And he wanted to vote for Adlai Stevenson, of course, like everybody else at the University of Chicago. Adlai Stevenson was our man.

SG: My father was a big fan of Adlai Stevenson, for whatever that is worth.

WB: Well. How many of us would be happy—well, I suppose there were some of us who were disillusioned with Stevenson later on, but he made a very good impression then.

SG: Right.

WB: And Strauss wanted to vote for him, so I dutifully took him down to the local precinct, which I—he and I didn't live in the same precinct but I found where his was. He was living on the Midway then, on the south side of the Midway.

Irene Berns: 61st, yeah.

SG: 60th and Woodlawn or Dorchester?

IB: 60th [and Woodlawn], yeah.

WB: I'm in agreement.

SG: George Anastaplo¹¹ informed us that building was torn down a few months ago. George went walking by the site and saw that Strauss's former apartment building was being torn down, and he got permission to take a brick. [Laughter] And he sent a note to Nathan and me—it was very kind of him—but it got lost in faculty exchange. We only got the note three or four weeks later. And he was encouraging *us* to go get bricks.

IB: Too late!

SG: And in fact, since we started the Strauss Center, in particular whenever a European comes and is interested in Strauss, [they] will come to us in perplexity. And they'll say: Where is the plaque showing where Leo Strauss lived? Well, here in the United States, we don't that kind of thing for philosophers.

IB: Not until 50 years later, or something.

SG: So you took Strauss to the precinct?

WB: Yap.

SG: And he registered to vote with the intention of casting a vote for Adlai Stevenson?

WB: That's what he said, yes. And I don't know but I presume he went there and dutifully voted.

SG: Did he, in his Walgreen lectures and then in the book *Natural Right and History*, he—the Declaration plays, is mentioned very prominently.

WB: Yes.

SG: In *Natural Right* of course it's almost the first thing. In his teaching did he describe the Declaration as the source of the founding?

WB: No. He could have done that in talking with his students. I suppose one thing you would be interested in is the origin of the volume, whatever the title is, *The New Theory of Politics*—or what is that called?

¹¹ George Anastaplo: see "People."

SG: I don't know.

WB: Oh, yes you do. It's Herb Storing.¹²

SG: Oh—it has Strauss's epilogue at the end. I'm sorry; I'm blanking out on the name.

WB: I can't think of the name either. I have a copy of it in the other room. But that started in a meeting with some foundation fellow, Rockefeller or something like that. And Strauss in his conversations was critical of the new political science, the behavioralism. And this foundation guy said: Well, why don't you write something about it? And Strauss said: Well, why don't you give us a grant to write something about it? So they did. And then the next question was: Put together a group of students and hand out the assignments. I was given voting studies, and Storing had, I forget what he had, but—

IB: I'll go get the book.

WB: Bob Horowitz¹³ was there talking about—I forget. Marty Diamond¹⁴ was there. And we met once a week in the summer, and met in Strauss's building over there on 60th and Woodlawn, and anyway, we talked and Strauss commented. And Strauss's role of course was to focus on the work, and in the case of voting studies he pointed out the difficulty with all these other voting studies, and psychological ones, and sociological ones: they simply abstracted from politics. They simply couldn't understand that even the American voter may have had some political reason for casting his vote the way he did. And—

IB: What did you want?

WB: What's the title?

IB: *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics*.

WB: *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics*. Anyway, that's enough to be said about that.

SG: Well, that's very interesting. I don't think of Strauss as being aware of the content of voting studies.

WB: My office in this case was to—you know I wrote something. And it was a draft of something; and that brought it to the attention of Strauss, that there were actually people who said, in the case of sociology, they had some formula. I now forget what it was but it was a sociological formula to the extent that people voted because of their socio-economic [status] or something like that. And to exaggerate a bit, there were psychologists who were saying—and this I think is a slight exaggeration, but not much of one—people vote because of their toilet

¹² *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics*, ed. Herbert J. Storing (NY: Holt, Rhinehart, & Winston, 1962).

¹³ Robert Horowitz: see "People."

¹⁴ Martin Diamond: see "People."

training. And Strauss of course pointed out that people probably had some political reason for voting, and the best illustration of that, it came slightly after—well, somewhat after the publication of this book, you know, when I was at Cornell.¹⁵ Cornell was located in Tompkins County in New York. Tompkins County for its entire history had voted Republican until Barry Goldwater. What year was Barry Goldwater? '60?

SG: That would have been '64, wouldn't it?

WB: '64. '64. They voted for a Democrat. Now what happened—and I use . . . a great mass of people with different sociological and psychological—people moved into Tompkins County—or they didn't like Barry Goldwater, and for political reasons. Anyway—

SG: So Strauss met with the group of you, and Storing, and Marty Diamond and, I guess, Bob Goldwin?

WB: Bob Goldwin and Bob Horowitz, yap.

SG: Bob Horowitz. And he met with you weekly and discussed the contents of this book on the scientific study of politics.

WB: Well, he discussed the *subject* with us and, as I recall, each of us present made some sort of a presentation and in my case, the voting studies. I had to explain this is what the political science profession has come to: they say this sort of thing as to why people vote. And Strauss—

IB: Wasn't Leo Weinstein¹⁶ part of that?

WB: No. He'd been asked to and he failed to deliver.

IB: Oh, yeah.

SG: Well, one of the remarkable things about Strauss as a teacher is—I mean for instance, you and Bob Goldwin, and Bob Horowitz, and Martin Diamond,¹⁷ and Herb Storing. and Ralph Lerner,¹⁸ and Harry Jaffa,¹⁹ and probably some other people I'm not remembering, all did remarkable work on American politics. Strauss never taught American politics.

WB: No, but he helped us in the following way. In the first place, while this is on my mind, he once taught a course jointly with Ed Banfield,²⁰ and it was on some American subject. For some

¹⁵ Cornell University, in Ithaca, New York.

¹⁶ Leo Weinstein: see "People."

¹⁷ Martin Diamond: see "People."

¹⁸ Ralph Lerner: see "People."

¹⁹ Harry V. Jaffa: see "People."

²⁰ Edward C. Banfield (d. 1999) taught at the University of Chicago until 1959, when he took a position in the Government department at Harvard. He is the author of *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (1958) and *The Unheavenly City* (1970).

reason I wasn't there, but I'm told by both Strauss and Banfield that it didn't work, for some reason. Beyond that, Strauss met with each one of us as we were leaving to begin teaching, and talked and simply consulted with us as to how we would teach our subjects—in my case, how to teach constitutional law. That interested him. He may have known the names of certain cases but he certainly didn't know the details; but he knew about the importance of the Constitution and the importance of focusing on the Constitution in some particular way. So he talked with me about that; he talked with each of us about what we were going to teach. Did Ralph Lerner tell you about his experience at his Ph.D. oral?

SG: I don't remember that, no.

IB: [Laughter]

WB: Well, it has to do with me, too, so I mention it. I don't really know now who was the committee and who was present at Ralph's oral presentation, but I can imagine who was there. And they asked Ralph something about political science, and this was almost surely a question asked by one of the behavioralists in the department.

IB: David Easton.²¹

WB: David Easton, yes; thank you, Irene. Ralph—I, of course, was not there—Ralph said political science is in a mess. And Strauss, shortly after that—well, I should say I was due²² the next week, and Strauss came up to me before my thing and told me about what Ralph had said, and said: Don't you dare say anything like that, Mr. Berns. Well, I didn't, of course, but the effect of Strauss's warning had the effect of absolutely tying my tongue. [Laughter]

SG: Well, this raises an issue I wanted to ask you about: the epilogue, the epilogue to the book that you worked on with him—

WB: That became famous, or notorious, yes.²³

SG: It's a declaration of war. And did Strauss later suggest that it might have been wiser to take a different rhetorical approach? Or did he ever have any doubts about that?

WB: Well, a) he wrote the epilogue by himself.

SG: Right.

WB: And he did not consult us as to the content of the epilogue.

²¹ David Easton (d. 2014), Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago from 1947 to 1997. His major works include *The Political System* (1953) and *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (1965).

²² That is, due for his oral examination.

²³ That is, the Epilogue to *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics*.

SG: Well, my point is that it's not accidental that Ralph Lerner at his Ph.D. defense said this impolitic thing.

WB: Yap, and I don't recall that Strauss ever regretted having said it. Strauss had made his—well, he was not at war with the profession, really, so that when Herman Pritchett²⁴—I don't know whether you know this—

SG: I don't know, no.

WB: Well, Pritchett was chairman of the department, a very decent man, and he became president of the American Political Science Association. And at the annual meeting of the APSA when he, Pritchett, was president, he as president delivers the president's speech to the convention. And he invited Strauss to sit on the platform with him, which pleased Strauss, pleased him immensely. In a way, Pritchett was saying: This man is an important person in the profession of political science. It's interesting that Harry Jaffa took real exception to that, just as he took exception to the establishment of a Leo Strauss dissertation prize by the Association. According to Jaffa, this is—how in the world did he put it? I don't know; I forget now. I also should say I have had a war with Harry Jaffa in print and we don't talk to each other. And I thought it foolish to argue that it was beneath Strauss, [that] it was contemptible for Strauss to acknowledge the existence of the APSA. [Laughter]

SG: That was Jaffa's position?

WB: Yap, yap. It's foolish, of course. There was one other episode. I haven't thought about this for years. I forget who started it, but I got involved in it. It made me unhappy to be involved in it; but there was to be a public debate between Strauss—and Ed Shils?²⁵

IB: Maybe.

WB: Yeah, I think it was. The question was on the new political science, the behavioralism. And the meeting took place in—what's the big lounge in the social science research building?

SG: Well, the classroom that Strauss often taught in was Social Science 122, which is on the ground floor.

WB: No, that's a big auditorium.

SG: 302 has the giant oval table.

WB: And it's also the room where you met for tea.

SG: The tea room is on the second floor.

²⁴ Herman Pritchett: see "People."

²⁵ Edward Shils (d. 1995), sociologist and Distinguished Service Professor in the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago.

WB: Anyway.

SG: It was in the tea room?

WB: Anyway, I think it was there, and it was jam-packed because Strauss had his students and his supporters, and Shils was not a nobody.

SG: Right, right.

WB: And I started by asking a question—I forget what the question was—and neither one wanted to answer it, and there was absolute silence for a while. Well, eventually a discussion began. I don't know what ever happened with that. I don't think anyone was happy with it but it was an attempt on the part of the students to have this debate public.

SG: I'd like to come back to so many of Strauss's students choosing to work not in or not exclusively in political philosophy, but in American politics, American political thought. Why do you think that happened?

WB: Two reasons. In my case, for example, I was simply not competent to do the kind of work that Allan Bloom²⁶ did and I knew it. And secondly, Strauss emphasized the importance of teaching American politics properly. Storing was probably the best of us non-theorists, and Strauss must have known that, if only because Strauss must have had something to do with Storing's appointment to the department.

But something occurred once when Storing wrote a paper for a Strauss seminar, and it was clear that Strauss thought very well of what Storing had written on the subject. Let's say it was Thucydides or something like that, and Storing had never dealt with Thucydides. But Storing was a very smart person and Strauss knew that. But Storing never pretended to teach political philosophy, and I think that he never pretended to do it. But Strauss convinced us of the importance of what we were in our fields, and that's the answer to your question, really.

SG: So did he say to you: Well, Mr. Berns, you should really concentrate on the Constitution. Or did he say to Herb Storing: You should really, you know, follow up this work you're doing on race relations in the United States? Did he give specific—

WB: I don't think so, no.

SG: It was simply that he conveyed to you that working on American—

WB: That's the point of it, not to be disgraced and not to be ashamed of teaching this. Let someone else do this.

²⁶ Allan Bloom: see "People."

SG: You mentioned that Strauss was on your dissertation committee, and your dissertation was on the First Amendment.

WB: Yap.

SG: What role did he play on the committee? He read your dissertation?

WB: As I recall, not very much. My chairman was a fellow named Bob Horn, who didn't get tenure at Chicago. He went to Stanford. And Horn was a very good teacher and Strauss wanted Horn—this is a faculty matter, and I can't be sure of this, but I have reason to believe that Strauss argued for Horn's retention in his getting tenure at Chicago, which he didn't get.

IB: He didn't write, for one thing.

WB: He didn't write, yes. But he was a very good teacher, and he was my principal advisor.

SG: So did he give you any feedback on your dissertation?

WB: Yap, he said I should have talked more about John Stuart Mill.

SG: And once you turned the dissertation into a book, did he comment on the book?

WB: Not to my knowledge, no. He liked the title: *Freedom, Virtue and the First Amendment*.

SG: How would you describe Strauss as a teacher?

WB: You've asked that question of everybody. You know the answer to it.

SG: Well, I've gotten several different answers.

WB: What do you mean by your question?

SG: Well, I—

WB: Did he lecture? No.

SG: Okay. He did—the classes were done, the records of the classes we have have him working through a text.

WB: Yap.

SG: A reader, very often Mr. Reinken, would read a passage; Strauss would stop him, comment on what was read, and then go to the next selection.

WB: Yap.

SG: Yeah, and that was the case with the courses you took with him?

WB: Yap, each of us wrote a paper on that section for the day, and I remember struggling with my section, and my wife mentioned it yesterday—

IB: When I first knew Walter, he was struggling with his first paper for Strauss. He didn't know at all what he was up against.

WB: Well, I had some vague idea because this was—mine was not the first, and I knew what had happened previously.

IB: I thought it was the first paper of the semester.

WB: No, it was mine; but anyway, by that time I knew what I was up against. It was a question of reading something and not understanding the importance of something in the text, and I was anxious to come up with the right answer or the right reading of a particular section, and of course I didn't. And one of the things you learn from Strauss is to see something of importance in a particular text. You know, what Strauss taught me was how to read. I remember going to him very foolishly as a kind of confession, saying I had encountered some speed-reading program, or text, or book or something, and I was interested in it because I wanted to increase the speed with which I read. [Laughter] And he smiled at something like that: the problem is not how fast you can read a text but how well you read it. It had nothing to do with speed.

SG: So you asked what was behind my question and, I mean, there's nothing in particular behind it. But I'll ask a different question, which is: Did Strauss have a project in his teaching? Was there something he was trying to accomplish through his teaching political philosophy?

WB: A great political project, no. I'm trying to answer that question by saying something remote in your question, in a sense. I once, after I had read Harry Jaffa's *Crisis of the House Divided*,²⁷ I said to Strauss something to the effect that he [Jaffa] was one of your best students. And Strauss responded in some way that indicated to me that he didn't think so. After a couple of years, when I was smarter and more experienced with this, I said something about Allan Bloom,²⁸ and he said something about Bloom and Benardete²⁹ being—his first understanding was that Seth was by far the best, but then something happened and he wondered whether Bloom was not better. But they were the best. Now why were they the best? I suppose because they were the best who understood philosophy, understood the great problems of philosophy, understood about the importance of the theological-political question, and the importance of understanding that.

Your question about Strauss's project or however you put it: I suppose he was interested in the perpetuation of philosophy, the importance of it especially at a time when the world of classics was beyond contempt, as he looked at it. And political science was not even addressing the questions beyond that anywhere, we were so bloody confident that the end of the world had

²⁷ Harry V. Jaffa, *The Crisis of the House Divided* (University of Chicago Press, 1959).

²⁸ Allan Bloom: see "People."

²⁹ Seth Benardete: see "People."

come: this happy condition of liberal democracy in America, nothing to worry about. And he was worried about that. But he was worried about, I think, the future of philosophy.

SG: So his project was, by training students in the study of political philosophy, to try and create the conditions for the serious study of philosophy to continue.

WB: Yap, I think so. Yap. That was, again, for the rest of us the perpetuation of liberal democracy in the United States.

IB: Have you had anything to do with Seth Benardete, did you before he died?

SG: No, there was no chance. He died before we started.

IB: Oh, I see. Wasn't he really one of Strauss's best students, too?

WB: Oh sure, oh sure.

SG: Yeah.

WB: And Strauss said so. I spent one night with him [Benardete]. He actually just wore me out. You know, I ended up not knowing what the hell he was talking about.

IB: He was much more abstruse than Allan.

WB: Yap. Allan had something else. Allan Bloom was a better teacher than Strauss.

SG: You think so?

WB: Yap, [of] students, regular students. I'll tell you a story about that. This was at Toronto. Bloom and I were at Toronto together. One year he had Cliff Orwin³⁰ as his student, faculty assistant. That was after the heart attack. And Cliff came and was helping Allan, and on this occasion I was going down the staircase to go to a big lecture hall, and Cliff Orwin was coming up the staircase, having just come from the big lecture hall. I was to teach whatever I was to teach there, and Bloom had just finished teaching. And Cliff met me on the staircase and he met me with this question: How much of what Allan knows about Rousseau does he tell the students? I was just nonplussed with that; I didn't know how to answer it. So I asked him: What are you talking about? He said: Well, Allan has just finished something about Rousseau and passed it off, and that was that. I said: Yeah, that's about right. Why did you mention it? I asked. Well, he had just come from Harvey. He'd been Harvey's assistant—Mansfield³¹—at Harvard in a Gov 101 or something like that, and he said Harvey tells the students everything he knows about a particular subject. And I said yap, that's the trouble with Harvey Mansfield. I mean that, incidentally: he was a bad teacher of undergraduates.

³⁰ Clifford Orwin is professor of political science at the University of Toronto and the author of *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton University Press, 1994).

³¹ Harvey C. Mansfield: see "People."

And Allan Bloom—another thing about Allan. Toronto student grades were departmental grades, in a way, and everyone's grades were listed by chairman of the department. In this case, in Allan's, he had given a few students A's. No, no, no—he didn't give enough A's, that was the point. And the department chairman just took B-pluses or something like that and made them A's. And that infuriated Allan because he gave the A's in order to know which students should be in the upper seminars. So in the big 101 courses, if you got an A he was likely to allow you to enroll for the seminar. My point in saying this in connection with Strauss is that Allan knew better than Strauss the condition of the typical undergraduate student, or in our case, the typical graduate student. Strauss, I suppose, had to learn how stupid we were, really. Allan knew. Stupid of course is not the word, but how unprepared we were. And Allan was better at that. He was a better teacher of undergraduates. As to the other business, I won't say anything.

SG: Harry Jaffa said of Strauss as a teacher that he thought too highly of his students, that he tended to idealize them, think that they—well, I don't want to put words in his mouth, but he said that he thought too highly of them, Strauss did.

WB: What was the fault of that? What was the problem with that? I mean, that he gave good grades to bad students?

SG: No, that he simply overestimated them, in Harry Jaffa's view. He overestimated the students, what they were capable of.

IB: And then was therefore disappointed?

SG: No, I don't think Strauss was disappointed. I think Harry Jaffa's standing on the outside saying this is how he was.

WB: Well, Harry could be saying what I just said, really. Allan understood better how little American students knew. Whether that's what Harry was talking about, I'm not so sure.

SG: Well, what you said suggested it to me, but it's—

WB: Yap.

SG: It's what he said, and not what Strauss said, so—

WB: You know, can I think of someone that Strauss misjudged by thinking too much of? I don't think so. Of course that gets me back to—Strauss did not misjudge Harry Jaffa in that respect.

IB: So what are you, about 50 years late, aren't you, doing this now, so—

WB: Yes. Strauss certainly did not make a mistake about Allan Bloom, although they had that terrible—I don't know what started it, really. But there was a time when there was a real rift

between them, and it had a terrible effect on Allan. But you know, when the question came of teaching Jenny³² Greek, Strauss asked Allan to do it. Ever talk to Jenny, as a matter of fact?

SG: No, I haven't talked with her about—in this way.

WB: I don't know any case of where Strauss thought too well, *too* well, and “too well” being with unhappy consequences. I don't think he did. I think Strauss—to get back to what I said about Storing: Strauss thought very well of Herb Storing but he did not encourage Herb to go into philosophy. In my experience, he thought very well of Allan Bloom, and he should have. He thought very well of Seth Benardete; he should have. I think he thought very well of Ralph Lerner, and he should have. I think he thought well of Harvey Mansfield, although I never talked to him—you know, Harvey was never a student at Chicago. I think Strauss realized Harvey's virtues, which are considerable.

Another thing that struck me is about how fair Strauss was to religious people. There were frequently priests or—never rabbis in my experience, but priests surely, and Strauss always took them very seriously. And in a way—well, the best case of course would be Ernest Fortin³³ here. And it's a pity you couldn't—

SG: Yes, he's gone.

WB: He's gone. Because it would have been interesting to talk to him about Strauss. But the priests, the serious priests were concerned with how we should live, and Strauss respected that. And he could criticize a paper written by a—you know, a seminar paper and so forth—he would point out certain difficulties but he would never dismiss a religious person. Once I kind of tested his Jewishness. I said to him: Mr. Strauss, you are giving that—we were talking about Plato—that there is an element of truth in every honestly-held opinion. I said: There's an honestly-held opinion in Jews, or something or other. I wanted an answer for that. And he said: Well, they're different, aren't they? [Laughter] That told me volumes, you know.

What else?

SG: Do you think Strauss learned anything from his experience of America or his experience of American students?

WB: Oh, sure.

SG: What?

WB: To some extent he knew, he learned something about political science from us who wrote this book. Us, as in this book, whatever it's called. There were, you know, certain things going on in the profession that we knew that he didn't know, although he must have had a pretty good view of it because some of his colleagues in his department—David Easton. I suppose he learned

³² Jenny Strauss: see “People.”

³³ Ernest Fortin: see “People.”

something from us. You know, he ended up knowing a great deal about America. Yap, he sure did.

IB: How long was he at the New School when he first came?

WB: Not so very long.

SG: I think he was at the New School from '43 to '49.³⁴

IB: So during the war, then?

SG: I think so.

IB: Yeah.

SG: That's a question I should know the answer to.

IB: Yeah, but I mean, I would think during those years, if they were the war years, he would have learned quite a bit. And the New School—though it was full of people who were refugees, too.

SG: Yeah. Well, but this was the meaning of my question—obviously he was, he grew up in the German university system, you know, I guess he moved to the United Kingdom in something like 1935, and so the United States is something completely different from what he had grown up with and where he had studied. And maybe there isn't any, you know—I don't know how one would know if he did learn something in particular about American political science, certainly. But whether the country introduced something new to him that he didn't understand already before he came here.

IB: I would think that he would learn a lot, appreciate—

WB: That's a good question. I'm thinking of, for example, had he read Tocqueville before he came to America? Probably not, but he knew Tocqueville when I knew him.

SG: You began by describing him as a great defender of liberal democracy in practice, and that meant being a great defender of the United States.

WB: Yap. Well, that's apparent. That was apparent in his Walgreen lectures.³⁵ Something else: there are two stories about this. Eric Voegelin³⁶ gave a Walgreen lecture, and I went to the first and then didn't go to the others. And then my first teaching assignment was at LSU,³⁷ and

³⁴ Strauss was professor at the New School for Social Research from 1938 to 1948.

³⁵ Published as *Natural Right and History*.

³⁶ Eric Voegelin: see "People." His Walgreen lectures were published as *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (1952).

³⁷ Louisiana State University.

Voegelin was a professor at LSU. So I went to Strauss and asked for some sort of guidance with respect to Eric Voegelin, what should I do. And he said: Well, he's read everything. [Laughter] And the other story about this is—you ever hear of Wilmoore Kendall³⁸?

SG: Yeah, sure. He corresponded with Strauss when Kendall was at the *National Review*.

WB: Yap. Well, I was a colleague of Kendall's at Yale, and Kendall came to me with a question: Would Strauss be able to talk with him? He was going somewhere and he would stop in Chicago if he thought Strauss would talk with him. I said: Of course he'll talk, just write him. So he did, and they talked. And then afterwards I got essentially the same account of that conversation from each of them. And Kendall had been reading Eric Voegelin, and was mighty impressed with Voegelin and insisted that Eric Voegelin was essentially a religious man. And apparently there was then a discussion as to the evidence: Where in Voegelin's writings did you come to the conclusion or were you entitled to come to the conclusion that he was basically a religious man? And finally Strauss—and this came from both of them—Strauss said: Mr. Kendall, can you imagine Eric Voegelin on his knees, praying? And Kendall, who was an honest man: No. [Laughter] And that was the end of that. I don't suppose you had any occasion ever to see or listen to Eric Voegelin.

SG: No. I had no chance to see him. There may be tapes available of him, I don't know. I mean—

WB: There's a program that he and Allan are on together.

SG: I didn't know that.

WB: I forget the—

IB: Mark Blitz,³⁹ remember, was a student of Voegelin's, a first-year student, graduate student. He said he came out whirling [laughter]; he had no idea what in the world was being said.

WB: Anyway if you'd ever met—I'll tell you a story about Voegelin. I was at—what's that place in Austria?

IB: Salzburg, I guess.

WB: Salzburg. I was in the Salzburg seminar.

IB: Yeah.

WB: I was teaching a Salzburg seminar one summer, and I went back through Germany; for some reason, I stopped through Munich to see the Voegelins and had dinner with him. I always got along with him okay. And he had recently been appointed to the—what's his name?

³⁸ Wilmoore Kendall: see "People."

³⁹ Mark Blitz, Fletcher Jones Professor of Political Philosophy at Claremont-McKenna College.

IB: The Weber, I believe.

WB: The Max Weber chair at Munich. And I said to him, that's very nice. I said: Who occupied the chair before you? And he said: Nobody. I said: What? I said Weber died in, what, 1922 or something like that! They couldn't find anyone to fill the chair, so it's Voegelin. I said okay. But Voegelin thought well of himself. There's much to be said about him. For example, having said disparaging things, I feel obliged to speak about his virtues. He and his wife left Germany at a certain time, and they had to leave in a hurry. You see, he certainly wasn't Jewish but for political reasons he had to leave, and they had to leave a house and they sold the house to someone with the understanding that the payment for it would come in Switzerland or wherever the Voegelins—they realized that this probably wouldn't be the case; they would get rid of their house but they wouldn't get anything for it. But in fact, they did. The guy who bought the house actually transferred the money to Switzerland and so forth. Anyway, Voegelin was anti-Nazi, that's my point in this story. He deserves some credit for that because he was certainly not Jewish.

SG: Right, right. At Cornell you were in the thick of the unpleasantness there.

WB: I sure was, yap.

SG: Did Strauss ever discuss those days with you?

WB: I think so. In the first place, Strauss came and lectured at Cornell, you know.

SG: That would have been before the takeover?

WB: That was before the takeover, about a year before the takeover, actually.

SG: These were black separatists or black nationalists who took over the administration building.

WB: Yes, very nasty white—what were they, SAS?

SG: SDS.⁴⁰

WB: SDS, yap. All I can remember is Strauss was very sympathetic to me and Allan of course, and understood why we were leaving.

⁴⁰ Students for a Democratic Society. Members of the Afro-American Society (AAS) took over Willard Straight Hall in April 1969 to protest against University policies that were perceived as racist. The AAS members emerged the next day with bandoliers and rifles, which distinguished Cornell's student takeover from the scores of unarmed student takeovers of university administration buildings in the United States in the late 1960s. Berns had been chair of the department of government at Cornell from 1963-67 and had been part of administrative decisions that were the cause of the protest. Both Berns and Bloom left Cornell in 1969. See Bloom's account in *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987).

SG: Yeah.

WB: You have any idea what it was to leave? I think on it. Our family was there, you know. Three children in school; we had a house to sell. And I think it never occurred to me that I wouldn't get a job, which I think back on: how foolish that was. How could I be so sure that I would get a job? But luckily I did. George Will was the guy who got me the job at Toronto. Did you know that story?

SG: I think when I first—early on after I met Bloom, he told me something about George Will, but whatever it was, I've forgotten.

WB: Well, I had resigned my professorship. That was reported in *The New York Times*. George Will⁴¹ read that. George Will was an assistant professor of political science at Toronto. George Will had come to Cornell when I was chairman, looking, making a decision as to where he was going to go to graduate school. He went to Princeton. When he saw my name, he then went to the chairman of the department [at Toronto] and said, try to hire me. So I went there. And I then said, after I got there: So there's another one of us. And that's how Allan got the job, so the two of us went up there. And George Will was responsible for that.

SG: That's wonderful.

WB: And then a couple of years later, George Will had an offer to come to Washington, and he came to me and asked my advice and pretended to be uncertain as to what he should do. He had an opportunity to be a journalist in Washington or continue to be a political scientist. I pretended to take that question seriously . . . George, I think maybe you should be a journalist in Washington. And the rest is history.

SG: He's still going strong.

IB: Yeah.

WB: He sure is.

SG: TV is made for him.

WB: Oh, yap.

SG: The way that he writes, the readers don't exist for him anymore—I mean, maybe—

IB: Too abstruse.

SG: Maybe you and I and a few others, perhaps, but the average newspaper reader doesn't have patience to read somebody like George Will. But on TV he can be very powerful.

⁴¹ George Will (b. 1941), Pulitzer-prize winning journalist and political commentator.

WB: And he speaks in full sentences.

IB: And he's succinct, which is appreciated.

SG: Right, right. I was interested in Strauss's reaction to the events at Cornell for a couple of reasons. One was [that] it was one of several things around that time, 1968, that marked a change in what it meant, in what America is. I mean, you know, the events at Cornell and all around the country, different university takeovers but also, you know, a new Left rising up: the SDS; hippies appearing; the sexual revolution. All this happened around the same time.

WB: Yap.

SG: And you know it was just a few years before Strauss died, but he saw this. He must have seen the ground was shifting under his feet. I was wondering if he had, you know, if he had any reflection on it.

WB: I wasn't with him, so I don't know. You know, you could ask Harry about that, of course. He [Strauss] went out to Claremont. I'm sure Harry was responsible for making that possible.

SG: I think so.

WB: But it was, I gather, a very unhappy time there.

SG: Yeah, I—you know, I asked Harry about Strauss's time at Claremont and he insisted steadfastly that that the Strausses were happy there, but that they had to move to St. John's because of Ms. Strauss, and he brought up various things.

WB: I don't know about that. [Berns mentions Leon Kass⁴² and asks if Gregory will be interviewing him.] I mention his name [Kass] in this connection because of course he knew Strauss at St. John's, when Strauss left Claremont and went to St. John's, and it was possible he would be in a position to say something.

IB: Well, he and Bob Goldwin. Bob Goldwin was instrumental in bringing him to St. John's, was he not?

WB: Yap, unfortunately. Something amusing: I was there at St. John's when Strauss was in the hospital. I forget why it was I went there; maybe it was because Strauss was in the hospital. He had this splendid suite in this hospital. I think Leon had something to do with getting it. And I said to him in the hospital room suite: Boy, this is terrific. And I wonder what it cost for something like that, and Strauss . . . I never found out, of course. But Strauss's notion of a high price for a suite was \$10 a night; it was probably \$200 or something and somebody else was picking up the tab. I forget that. I was at Strauss's funeral when I was in St. John's and stayed in the Lerner's house.

⁴² Leon Kass: see "People." Kass declined the Strauss Center's invitation to be interviewed.

IB: In the Kasses' house. Kasses'. You were all there—I mean, you, and Allan, and Howard, maybe?

WB: Yap.

IB: I believe it was also the Yom Kippur War.

WB: It was. It was Strauss's funeral and we went to Annapolis at the—anyway, Leon Kass had a house there but he was in Montreal or someplace like that, and so he arranged with Ralph [Lerner], whom he knew, and he and Ralph—[to Irene] you weren't there, were you?

IB: I wasn't there.

WB: Ralph and I stayed in the Kass house in Annapolis on the occasion of Strauss's funeral. And we were having dinner someplace on the waterfront in one of those places, and someone came in and had just talked with Mrs. Strauss and conveyed the message that she wanted me to deliver one of the eulogies. And I spent the night in the Kasses' house trying—I suppose she wanted a non-Jew, I think that's it, the only reason. No, Allan delivered a eulogy, and Joe Cropsey⁴³ delivered a eulogy, so to speak.

IB: Joe had trouble, didn't he?

WB: Oh boy. And I, you know, who in the hell was I? As I suggested, it was only because I was not Jewish, so that was that. Then I remember the rabbi delivering some eulogy. He didn't know Strauss from his elbow: [imitating the rabbi] "This great defender of the equality of man." [Laughter]

IB: You said something about, I remember, most of the students paid attention *only* to Strauss. And Walter, being more grown up, said something about Mrs. Strauss which . . . attention to what you were doing.

WB: Oh, the eulogy, I said, on behalf of the students I want to thank her for—

IB: Well, but that's the kind of thing that students don't think about, in a way, you know, who else is involved.

WB: Yap.

IB: Young students.

WB: Okay.

⁴³ Joseph Cropsey: see "People."

SG: Let me ask just a few more questions. In your experience with Strauss and the courses you took from him, how did his practical intelligence come across? His practical wisdom. I mean, Laurence Berns's⁴⁴ stories are very funny, but they're all along the lines of: this professor doesn't know how to operate a car, or this professor doesn't know how to turn an electric fan on, this professor doesn't—you know these kinds of things. They are very funny; you know this man who is living so much in the world of ideas that he just doesn't know the most basic things going on around him. But it's also the case that, you know, people like Wilmore Kendall, who were very much involved in practical politics or political affairs respected his opinion very highly. I'm just wondering if you had any thought along these lines about Strauss in terms of his practical wisdom.

WB: By “practical wisdom,” what do you mean?

SG: His understanding—

WB: Can he change a light bulb?

SG: No, his understanding of practical affairs—of, you know, international relations, of events in the United States, of—

WB: Oh boy, oh boy.

SG: Of, you know—

WB: He knew about international affairs. And he told stories about—who was that friend of his who was plagued by the thought that he was responsible for the Russian Revolution by advising that the Germans allow Lenin to go back to Moscow? Who was that? Kurt Riezler?

IB: Yeah, it was Kurt Riezler.⁴⁵

WB: You know, these friendships with very important people. Walter Benjamin, for example. Strauss knew all these people, and some of them he argued with. The trouble is that I haven't thought about these things for years, and their names—. But he advised us to read Kurt Riezler and other people of that sort. He advised us to read Churchill's histories. One of Churchill's biographies, he described as a masterpiece.⁴⁶ And of course you've seen the statement he delivered in our seminar on the occasion of Churchill's death. You've seen that?

SG: Yeah.

WB: Well, he understood that Churchill was of course *the* defender of western civilization. Oh, he knew these things.

⁴⁴ Laurence Berns: see “People.”

⁴⁵ Kurt Reizler: see “People.”

⁴⁶ That is, Churchill's biography of the First Duke of Marlborough.

IB: Well, you're talking about practical politics, really, not the—

SG: Not how to turn on a light bulb but—

IB: No, but practical politics, certainly. He came from that; he learned from that, I should think, what he'd come from. The dangers.

WB: Now this next story has to do with your knowledge of the configuration of office space in the social science research building. There's a sort of offices on a kind of an open space. Right?

SG: Right.

WB: If you're coming from the corridor, you're getting this space and then there are offices off this space.

SG: Right, right.

WB: He had an office next to—

IB: Morgenthau.

WB: Hans Morgenthau.⁴⁷ And Hans Morgenthau [laughter] collected *The New York Times* to give him information daily. He had great stacks of *The New York Times*, and they're filling part of this corridor outside the office space. And Strauss said to me one time: These papers are sort of getting in the way. And he said something about—what was Morgenthau's famous something-versus-something? Morgenthau had a book about international politics. He had more than one book, but this one had the title *Scientific Man and Power Politics* or something like that. So Strauss says: Implicitly identifying himself⁴⁸ with scientific man and power and politics, pushing these papers and making it difficult for Strauss to get into his office or something like that. Then having said that to me, he immediately apologized: he shouldn't have said that. That was the craziest thing about Morgenthau. He collected all these papers but it turns out he was getting the early edition of the *Times*, I remember. What was that?

IB: I'm not sure.

WB: Well, he collected all these papers but they were—he was getting, I think he was getting the *Times* by mail and what he was getting those early editions.

IB: It was too late. I mean, it was—

WB: And the index. And *The New York Times* index didn't index the proper page to the early edition or something. Now to get back to your question: Of course, what was marvelous about

⁴⁷ Hans Morgenthau: see "People."

⁴⁸ That is, Morgenthau.

Strauss was that he understood what was going on in Europe. And he of course appreciated Winston Churchill. It was Churchill's biography of the First Duke of Marlborough—⁴⁹

SG: His life with Marlborough.

WB: Yap, yap. Strauss said that was a masterpiece; said some of the best history ever written, or something like that.

SG: Does the word Straussian mean anything? Is there such a thing as a Straussian?

WB: Well, when it's used, it refers to students of Leo Strauss. When it was used in the press here in the last couple of years, it was used with reference to people like Paul Wolfowitz,⁵⁰ who had been students and not necessarily the closest students. I think Paul, for a fact, would say that Herb Storing had more effect on him than Strauss.

SG: Right, right.

IB: The term Straussian, it seems to me, doesn't—there are too many distinctions between people. I should say students *of*.

WB: Once the neo-conservatives are all Straussians, thinking this way. That woman in Canada, whatever her name is.⁵¹ What is her name? There's another name I forget, the real anti-Straussian.

SG: Right.

IG: It's people who don't like Strauss who use the term Straussians, generally. It's pejorative.

SG: Your controversy with Harry Jaffa: on the outside it looks like a quarrel over what Strauss's legacy is.

WB: Well, it's eastern and western Straussians or something like that. But I don't think my quarrel with Harry Jaffa is related to Strauss. The trouble with Harry Jaffa: I once wrote a letter to him that was published, in which I said he could have been the poet of American politics or something like that, and he wasted his time in arguments with his old friends. Having alienated—and you know, he alienated even Joe Cropsey, you know they were classmates together in grammar school or something. You know the absurdity of that. It came to a head—Jaffa wanted a chapter in the Strauss-Cropsey volume.⁵² He wanted a chapter on Churchill, I guess, or something.

⁴⁹ Winston S. Churchill, *Marlborough: His Life and Times* (1933). Reprinted by The University of Chicago Press in 2002.

⁵⁰ Paul Wolfowitz: see "People."

⁵¹ Shadia Drury, Canada Research Chair in Social Justice at the University of Regina (Saskatchewan), author of *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (1999).

⁵² *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, first published in 1963.

IB: Oh.

WB: Wasn't it that?

IB: Yeah.

WB: And Joe said that was not appropriate, because whatever Churchill's virtues, he was not a political philosopher. And Jaffa got to the point. Jaffa said: Unless you do this, I'll take my chapter out. He had written one on Aristotle, I think. And Joe said: Sure, go ahead. Somebody else wrote the chapter on Aristotle. Holton? Who's that student of mine? Jim Holton. He wrote the chapter. Oh, it doesn't make any difference. But that's what the absurdity is. You know, Jaffa had a terrible argument with Harvey Mansfield. Unnecessarily. The last episode with me was a couple of years ago when I published a big op-ed on Lincoln in the *Wall Street Journal*, and Jaffa wrote me a letter in which he said that was all right so far as it went, and then he attached something *he* had just written. So I wrote back and said that all right so far as it goes. And that was the end of that. It all comes back.

IB: Strauss isn't responsible for all those things. You're interested in more of Strauss and Jaffa fights.

WB: I added one of my statements, something to the effect that I hope he goes into a monastery, and especially one of the monasteries where they don't speak at all (I forget the name for them). He then said publicly in all kinds of places, apparently, I put out a contract on his life.

IB: Enough.

WB: The principle . . . Harry Jaffa. *The Crisis of the House Divided* was published in 1959, and in it he promises a second volume, which appears in 2000 or something like that. All those years, what was he doing? Writing silly essays—not necessarily silly essays but trivial essays, and getting in fights with his friends.

IB: The second volume: Did you read it, Walter, or not?

WB: I never read it.

IB: People were very disappointed.

WB: It was too bad, because I really liked the *Crisis of The House Divided*. What else?

SG: Well, one last—one or two last questions. Did you consider Strauss your friend?

WB: Oh, sure. Oh, sure. Well, if you want a very exact definition of friendship à la Allan Bloom's *Love and Friendship*,⁵³ that was impossible between Strauss and me. We could not be friends of that sort. But I never called him Leo, certainly. It never would occur to me to do that.

SG: I think all of his students addressed him as Mr. Strauss.

WB: He was always Mr. Strauss, yes. There was a famous story, it had to do with Allan—with Abe. That's right, Abe Shulsky.⁵⁴ You know him?

SG: I know Abe.

WB: You know Abe. So Abe was a student of Allan's, and I guess when Abe got a teaching—he became a teacher at Cornell.

IB: For a couple of years at Cornell.

WB: And Allan said something about: Now you don't have to call me Mr. Bloom anymore, and you can call me Allan. And Abe said: All right, I'll call you Allan in department meetings and outside it's always Mr. Bloom. [Laughter] You know, I had, we had Strauss for dinner when he came to Cornell. I had lunch with Strauss more than once, I think, in Chicago in the tropical hut.

SG: The Tiki. Was it the Tiki?

IB: Is it still there?

SG: No, it closed 20 years ago, I think.

IB: I grew up in that—in the 40's, I guess.

WB: And he knew my wife, and one talked to him when one had a child, and he was interested in that. He always said if people gave him pictures of children he didn't know what to do with them but he accepted them. Sure. And I knew Mrs. Strauss; and we were expected to know Mrs. Strauss. Sure, friends.

IB: A friend's friend—that's the kind of thing that one was with a person like Strauss.

WB: You know, I think I was closer to him in some sense at least than I was at least with any other teacher. I never had lunch with Herman Pritchett, whom I admired. Can I think of someone? What other teacher did I have?

IB: Bob Horn.

⁵³ Allan Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, published posthumously in 1993.

⁵⁴ Abram Shulsky, now Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute, received his graduate degrees at the University of Chicago, where he studied with Strauss. He has worked for the United States government in multiple capacities and for the Rand Corporation.

WB: I had lunch with him here in Washington, years afterwards. Bob Horn had come from Stanford because one of his students was Tony Kennedy in the Supreme Court, and Kennedy was being something⁵⁵ and Kennedy had asked Bob Horn to come. So I had lunch with Bob Horn, but that was thirty years after, forty years after I had had Horn as a teacher. No, I think I was in some important ways closer to Strauss than any other teacher I ever had. And why? I admire him more than any other teacher I ever had.

SG: Looking back on Strauss now—well, looking back on him, how do you think of him?

WB: I hesitate to use the word, but there is no hesitation: reverence, I suppose. We were all, people like me were always very careful to resent someone's statement that Strauss had his disciples. We were not disciples. He was our teacher, that's all. We were not disciples.

SG: Yeah. Can you say something more about that? 'Cause it is something—one of the objections to Straussians is that, you know, the impression that people in universities have that the students of Strauss are somehow all reading off the same page or, as you say, disciples.

WB: Well, I can imagine disagreeing with Leo Strauss on certain matters, but certainly not if we're talking about Plato's *Laws*, for example. And what does that mean, reading off the same page?

SG: Well, just that that they're all saying the same thing. That Strauss's students are simply repeating the same doctrine or something like that.

WB: I don't know of any doctrine. You know, that criticism suggests that we are like Peter and James, and so forth, following Jesus or something like that and what Jesus says. Well, there's no equivalent to "Strauss says." And that's a good point: Strauss didn't say anything the way in the way that Jesus said some things.

IB: Don't people who talk that way mean everybody thinks the same way in terms of taking texts seriously? I mean, you can say something like that—

WB: Yap. I always say that people should take certain texts seriously and certain other texts, not.

IB: Yeah.

WB: But—

IB: But you're not a bunch of parrots. I mean, that's what really—

⁵⁵ Presumably being honored or receiving a distinction of some kind.

WB: I know. It's absurd to think that the term Straussian is associated with the neo-conservatives. And who are the neo-conservatives? Well, Paul Wolfowitz and Bill Kristol.⁵⁶ He's a neo-conservative, but he's certainly not a Straussian.

IB: Nope.

WB: Yes, that's silly talk.

IB: But it is used. I mean, you're quite right; it's used that way but by enemies, in a way.

SG: Right, right.

WB: Well, to repeat something I said which is absolutely true: at the time when Strauss was alive, we resented the notion that we were disciples. That was simply an inappropriate term.

SG: Right, right.

WB: We were students; he was our teacher in a very honorable sense. The presence at Chicago caused some trouble with his colleagues there because they found out that some of their best students were, turned out to be, Strauss students. And I recall once—was it David Easton? I remember once him saying something to the effect: I don't give a damn what Strauss said. And you know, they found some of their best students drifting away from them.

SG: Yeah.

IB: Or questioning them.

WB: Well, not writing Ph.D. dissertations under them. Most dissertation students at Chicago ended up writing a dissertation under Herb Storing. He was chairman of at least fifty percent of the students.

SG: Is that right?

WB: He was a terrific teacher. He had a house on Hatch Lake, which is five miles from Colgate, where he grew up. His father was a professor at Colgate—in fact, had been temporary president at Colgate. And they had this summer home on this Hatch Lake. It had a sort of boathouse close to the dock on their property and he used it as a study in the summer. And he had a, as I recall, just a heap of Ph.D. theses there that he read—

IB: Summer work. Right.

WB: during the summer.

IB: He didn't have disciples either.

⁵⁶ William Kristol: see "People."

WB: No, he didn't. But boy, did he have devoted students. I don't know what else, Steve—

SG: Well, okay. I think we've covered a lot of ground.

WB: Well, I feel so inadequate because, well, I can't compare myself to Allan Bloom, but I know that Allan Bloom would speak much sensibly about the important things that Leo Strauss taught than I can.

SG: Oh, I think you've said some very interesting things.

WB: I have anecdotes.

IB: Allan did at Toronto, did a wonderful piece, which I don't know where it's published, on Strauss's—

WB: Political theory.

IB: political theory, on which you already know, on Strauss's development.⁵⁷

WB: It was a kind of eulogy.

IB: As a thinker, really. Well, it was to make up for the eulogy in a way, but it was the development of Strauss's thinking. You no doubt know that, 'cause it's a wonderful piece of understanding how he came to be what he was. But you must know everything—you're doing this project.

SG: Well, I hardly know everything.

⁵⁷ Allan Bloom, "Leo Strauss: September 20, 1899 – October 18, 1973," in *Giants and Dwarfs* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1990).