

Interview with Jeff Burnam

March 4, 2016

Gayle McKeen: This is Gayle McKeen here with Jeff Burnam. Let's get started by your telling me when you came to Chicago, how it was you came to Chicago, and how you came to study with Leo Strauss.

Jeff Burnam: It's one of the more interesting stories. I had been a student at Cornell and took a course from Walter Berns in Constitutional Law. Then he also taught a course on Plato's *Republic*, which was basically using the Bloom understanding of *The Republic* and the Strauss understanding of *The Republic*. Bloom wasn't there at the time. Bloom came in the second term of my senior year, and I was already on my way to Chicago then. Then he went back to Yale, or he went back to Yale for a while. So unlike some of the Yale-Chicago students, I was not part of that crowd, although of course we knew each other. I was a math major at first, and Paul Wolfowitz's¹ father was the chair in the department, so Paul and I knew each other, but the other people like Tom Pangle² I didn't really meet until I got to Chicago.

To get to the point, a friend of mine, a good friend of mine, Charles Umbanhower (who unfortunately has just passed away) and I decided based on the courses we had taken from Walter Berns³ that we would study at Chicago—go to Chicago to study with Strauss. Neither one of us as it turned out were political theorists. We wound up teaching Con Law and American government and public administration and so forth, so we were different from the other Strauss students who were primarily political theorists. Charles and I decided that if we were going to study in Chicago and put up all this money, and make this choice, we ought to meet Strauss. So we got in our car: we drove 750 miles from Ithaca to Chicago. We were supposed to meet Strauss in his office in the afternoon. When we got there, we were told that he wasn't feeling very well and we'd have to go over and meet him in his apartment. So he met us in his apartment.

That was my first introduction to him, and of course it was a huge surprise. Having read *Natural Right and History* and some of his writings, I was expecting this fairly large kind of imposing figure. [Laughter] When I met him and realized how soft his voice was and how so, shall I say, impish he was, it was a huge surprise. So he was there, and he was very courteous and thought he should offer us a refreshment. So he went to his refrigerator, which Jenny had kept stocked and the only thing in it—it was completely empty, there were, like, two boiled eggs. He offered us each a boiled egg, which of course we refused. [Laughs] So that was how I met Leo Strauss.

GM: And what was your conversation like with him? Did you ask him about his classes?

¹ Paul Wolfowitz: see "People."

² Thomas Pangle: see "People."

³ Walter Berns: see "People."

What did you talk about? What sense did you get of him in that experience?

JB: Well, I don't know exactly. I mean, there was nothing remarkable about the conversation. He asked us why we were interested in studying in Chicago, and we told him. I don't think the conversation itself was as remarkable as the boiled eggs. [Laughter] So that was that conversation.

GM: So it didn't dissuade you from coming to Chicago, it—

JB: We'd already pretty much made up our mind. I can't remember exactly when, but we discovered Herb Storing.⁴ I guess we knew about Herb Storing, but when I got to Chicago I started taking Con Law and even got interested in public administration; he became my mentor. He was the chair of my Ph.D. dissertation and a really good friend. Like Strauss, he was unassuming. Neither one of them would make you or your wife or anybody else nervous. They were very approachable. Herb passed away at the age of 49, the same age as his father had passed away, by the same—they both had heart attacks. But he was the professor I saw the most of. And then there were others of no particular note that taught Con Law. There's a fellow named John Roche,⁵ who had been Lyndon Johnson's academic advisor who was visiting there. And on his final exam, I criticized a question and I got a C. And Storing said: Oh, don't worry; we're not going to hire him. But he was sort of combative. But anyway, that will have to be edited out.

GM: What was it like being in one of Strauss's classes?

JB: Well, they were quite remarkable. I was in seminars; I was in a couple of lecture courses that he gave. What I remember most of all about the seminars was that he was always learning himself. He had some notes which were always fresh. He was reading the text and in a very small handwriting he'd have a sheet of paper, his notes for the class of that day. One thing I remember was he once said [that] the secret of good teaching was to assume that there was someone in the classroom who was smarter than you were. So that was the child he didn't want to leave behind. And it conforms with my own teaching experience, which is if you set high expectations for students, they will meet them. He sort of took us into our confidence, almost as if we were fellow scholars. That's an exaggeration, but still we were reading the text together. A student would deliver a paper at the beginning of the class, and he [Strauss] would critique it, and then we'd discuss the class together. There was a fellow named Donald Reinken who would read the text. Is anybody in touch with Donald Reinken?

GM: I think he gave permission for his voice to be heard⁶ in the [audiofiles] that were put online. Not in terms of interviewing him, no. But his voice is on so many of the

⁴ Herbert J. Storing: see "People."

⁵ John P. Roche (d. 1994), consultant to John F. Kennedy, and advisor to President Lyndon Johnson from 1966-68; professor at Tufts University Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

⁶ That is, identified as his voice.

transcripts. He read in many of Strauss's classes.

JB: The reason I was asking, is that some of us were wanting to track him down. We had no idea what happened to him.

GM: I might have some information at the office. I can get in touch and let you know.

JB: That would be interesting. There was some other fellow who was close to Strauss at the time named Marvin Kendrick,⁷ and I'm not sure what happened to him either.

GM: I don't know.

JB: There were some people that sort of dropped off the scene. That's what I remember about him, the way he drew us into his confidence. Even there was a student named of Alan Seltzer, who is here in Washington. Actually, he challenged Alan to a debate.

GM: On what? What was the debate about?

JB: It was on the general question of whether there could be an independent social science, independent of natural science, which Strauss said there could be and Alan Seltzer challenged him, and so he said: Well, let's have a debate. Seltzer was terrified, but he debated him and he did a pretty good job.⁸

GM: Just right on the spot?

JB: No, no, they set up a special debate in the lecture hall, and they debated. No, he didn't challenge it right off.

GM: That was not recorded, apparently. I've never heard of a recording of that.

JB: No, it probably wasn't.

GM: That's a pity.

JB: So that was very remarkable. I had an interesting relationship with Mr. Strauss. I didn't know it at the time, but looking back on it, he sort of treated me as if I was somebody that might be going into government or politics. At the time, I thought he sort of treated me as if I was a gentleman, which for a Platonist is a put-down but for an Aristotelian is not. So when I gave my paper on book 6 of the *Ethics*, I used an illustration about the practical syllogism, and the major premise might be: Don't do

⁷ Kendrick's translation of Xenophon's *Hiero* appears in Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, revised and expanded edition, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (NY: The Free Press, 2000).

⁸ The Strauss Center's efforts to contact Mr. Seltzer and to learn more about the debate were unsuccessful.

business with incompetent firms; but the more important premise is which firms are incompetent. He loved that. It was a very homely example, but he thought that was great. He'd [say] you're right, that is the most important in a practical syllogism.

That fits my career in many ways because I worked for Dick Lugar⁹ for twenty years. Dick Lugar is a very principled man. He was a Rhodes Scholar, very, very smart; he was first in his class in college. Although he's very principled, he's always interested in how the principles are going to work out in practice, so that was the difference between him and many senators who weren't philosophical—well, he's not philosophical—many senators who are not principled, let's say. I don't mean in necessarily a bad way, but are they are merely pragmatic and the others who were ideological. When Senator Lugar ran for president in 1996, I arranged a breakfast for him and Harvey Mansfield,¹⁰ because Harvey Mansfield supported him for president and I thought it would be interesting if they met. Well, it was remarkable. I had to really keep the conversation going, and Lugar at one point said: I'm doing too much of the talking, what are you interested in? And Harvey said: I'm interested in the whole. That's a conversation-stopper if I ever heard one. So I had to kind of intervene and steer it back to subjects that were more practical, like affirmative action and stuff like that.

So that's what I remember about Strauss from his seminars, and I took a number of seminars with him. I took Xenophon. I remember Marvin Kendrick was in that seminar; he later did his dissertation on Xenophon. There was a lecture course I took on Plato's *Gorgias*, which was quite interesting and amusing as well. We were talking about the true arts and the sham arts. And there were these two German students in the class, and Strauss was talking about the true art of gymnastics and the false art of cosmetics; and the German student raised his hand very forcefully and said: But Mr. Strauss, he said, wouldn't a man who was ugly have a right to use cosmetics? Strauss said: Indeed, it would be his duty! [Laughter] So I got a really good understanding of Plato, and Xenophon, and Aristotle from Strauss. Also, I failed to mention this: I think the first course I had from Strauss was *Natural Right and History*. It was a lecture course. It was just terrific. I just loved it. I think I may have already read the book.

GM: It wasn't really a rehash of the book, presumably?

JB: It followed the book very closely.

GM: I see.

JB: Actually, I might have read the book at that time rather than before I came, but I think I read it before I came. But anyway, it was a fairly large course. I don't know who did the grading. He must have had an assistant for a course with 50 people, maybe not. But the [exam] question, which was three hours long, was: Summarize the argument of this course. And I got an A; I don't know who graded it.

⁹ Richard Lugar served as a Republican Senator from Indiana from 1977-2013.

¹⁰ Harvey Mansfield: see "People."

GM: That's quite a complex task.

JB: Yeah, so that was interesting.

GM: How much did Strauss's pedagogy influence your own pedagogical style? I know you taught very different material.

JB: Well, that's a good point. Quite a bit. Every chance I get, I teach a seminar or even a tutorial and I try to engage with the students, not on a footing of equality, but I go into the class trying to learn something myself and not just teach them what I think they want to know. Another person who was there at the same time was Bob Goldwin,¹¹ who was a terrific teacher and that was his style. Of course he had the St. John's connection, I think, before then; I don't know if he had been at St. John's, but anyway he taught in that same method—although I think he was trying to lead you to a certain conclusion, which is different from that.

GM: And Strauss wasn't trying to lead you to a specific conclusion?

JB: I don't think so, no.

GM: Interesting. So the sort of stereotype that you hear from Strauss's detractors, of course, is that Strauss had a very clear teaching in terms of method. But apparently you did not find that in your experience of his classes.

JB: Why do you say that? I thought I did.

GM: Oh you did, sorry, okay.

JB: Well, I thought I was saying that.

GM: You said he didn't lead you to a specific conclusion.

JB: Well, this is getting complicated. [Pause] Well, you have to remember that I've been teaching for a long time, and my teaching was interrupted by a long time in government. So I taught for a few years, I went to Washington in 1979, and other than teaching a few courses on the side, I didn't really teach full time until the last ten years. There's a lot of differences I suppose in my teaching style over the years. So I don't know, I'm not quite sure what I want to say now. I'm not sure I'm getting the point across. You asked me did it influence my teaching style. And yes, it did, but there are a lot of influences on my teaching style. It wasn't just his.

GM: But what I got from what you said before was that this sense of engagement that you're there as a learner in addition to being a teacher.

¹¹ Robert Goldwin: see "People."

JB: That's right.

GM: And that you feel very much that that was a part of Strauss's teaching.

JB: That's the part I learned from Strauss.

GM: So one thing that a number of Strauss's former students have talked about is this notion of the Straussian and whether or not they identify themselves as a Straussian. You don't have to say anything about that if you don't want. But what was your sense of what it meant to be a Straussian? Did you identify yourself as one in any way?

JB: Well, I was usually identified as a Straussian, but I never thought of myself as a Straussian because I never thought of Strauss or myself as being particularly dogmatic. I was horrified by some of the students that went out and preached what they viewed as Straussian doctrine. The background to that is that I was sort of a minor in philosophy and I studied with Norman Malcolm,¹² who'd been a student of Wittgenstein's. I studied with Elisabeth Anscombe,¹³ who was also a student of Wittgenstein's. There were actually interesting parallels between Wittgenstein and Heidegger and so on and so forth. Wittgenstein and Strauss, and the people Strauss studied with had in common a rejection of modernity. I mean everything from Descartes on was a mistake as far as they were concerned, at least the Wittgensteinians and Strauss also, although of course he had a lot of sympathy with Nietzsche, and Husserl and Heidegger as well. But going back to the premodern was something they had in common.

And I took this course from Elizabeth Anscombe, and it was called Pleasure. It's on my transcript. She wound up defending the scholastic definition of happiness. I thought that Malcolm, a person I had studied with at Cornell—I sort of treated him as a philosopher. I mean, he was analyzing philosophical questions on his own; he wasn't relying on somebody else. So my simplistic understanding at the time was, well, I think Leo Strauss is just a very profound historian of philosophy and he's not a philosopher. That was over-simple, but that was the way I perceived it at the time.

GM: And looking back, do you still see it that way?

JB: Oh no, of course not, because he, like Elizabeth Anscombe, actually was kind of working through the history of philosophy to reach philosophical conclusions of his own. But still the point remains that when people went out and sort of preached the Straussian doctrine, to me it was a dialogue, not a dogma. I didn't really see him that way. Although some of the people that have done that are really good and I don't disagree with them, but it's not my perception.

¹² Norman Malcolm (1911-1990), professor of philosophy at Cornell University from 1947 until his retirement.

¹³ G.E.M. Anscombe (1919-2001), British analytic philosopher with institutional affiliations to Somerville College, Oxford (1946-70) and Cambridge University (1970-79).

GM: When it came time for you to formulate your dissertation topic, did Strauss have anything to do with that?

JB: No, no, that was under Storing. It was on the federal regulation of broadcasting. Strauss was not a part of that. The one thing though when I left academia to take a job in the Congress, and I was working for the House Republican Conference among other things. I had a split job. Half my job was writing papers for the House Republican Conference, and one of them was on cost-benefit analysis, which was all the rage at the time, and I was trying to point out the limits of cost benefit analysis. In my draft I said: Even Aristotle said there was no mean with respect to adultery. I said: How many members of Congress that might read this would not agree with that? [Laughter] So I struck that. But that was an interesting example of the difference between working for the House of Representatives and a more academic setting.

GM: Right. And did you keep in touch with Strauss at all after you left Chicago?

JB: No, I guess not. When did he leave Chicago?

GM: The end of 1967.¹⁴

JB: He'd already left. I left Chicago in 1968. He went out to Claremont, I guess.

GM: That's right, yes.

JB: Then he passed away in 1973, was it? No, I wasn't in touch with him. But I was in touch with Storing a lot. And when I moved to Boston for a while, I taught as an instructor at Boston College, and that's where Harvey [Mansfield] and I became friends, although we were already friends, and Bob Faulkner.¹⁵ Then I was back at Northern Illinois University after that, and Storing taught a course there. Then I was at Augustana College, and I invited Bloom to come as a guest speaker, which was interesting.

GM: And did you meet Bloom at Chicago or did you know him before?

JB: He taught a seminar on Aristotle my senior year at Cornell, which Walter Berns took. We were all astounded: here's our professor taking a student honors seminar. This was before Bloom became wealthy and well dressed and stuff, but he came into class looking a bit disheveled and he had a cold, a bad cold, and he asked if anybody in the class had a handkerchief. Walter of course had two perfectly ironed and folded handkerchiefs, one in his breast pocket. He takes it out of his breast pocket and he hands it to Allan and says: You know, Allan, what you need is a wife. Allan says: You've done perfectly well, thank you. So well, that was my exposure to Bloom, I guess. I remember once going out on a nice spring day—I guess I was taking another class from him, a political theory class of

¹⁴ Strauss went to Claremont College in 1968.

¹⁵ Robert Faulkner: see "People."

some sort, and we went out on the lawn and had a jug of wine and stuff like that. I remember that. He and I were friendly but we were never close. There's some wonderful Bloom stories. I guess that's not part of your project.

GM: I'm sure people would be interested to hear them.

JB: Well, one I remember—this is second hand, you'd have to ask Abe Shulsky¹⁶ about it, but he was a resident in Telluride House where Paul and Abe were also residents, and there was this one reception where Peter Geach,¹⁷ who was Elizabeth Anscombe's husband, was visiting. This professor of medieval literature, who had no idea they were connected, referred to the bitter-tongued Miss Anscombe, and Geach just nodded his head. But I guess this isn't really a Bloom story, but the other story that was interesting was [this]. There was a seminar on the New Deal. Again, I wish I had taken it but I think it was just for Telluride students and I wasn't one of them. (Although they offered me to teach in their summer program once, which I had to turn down.) But Francis Perkins¹⁸ would travel up from New York and Jim Farley¹⁹ would also come to the seminar, and they'd talk about the New Deal. Farley would talk about how they got a bill passed, and then he'd turn to Francis and say: Now what was that bill all about, Francis? [Laughter] Oh, gosh there are a whole load of Bloom stories. But you ought to hear them more from his students than from me, I think.

GM: So it sounds like Strauss was supportive of your going into American politics.

JB: Oh, I think he would have been, yeah—

GM: A number of his students—well, Walter Berns for example—a number of them went into studying the American founding in particular, Ralph Lerner—

JB: Oh yeah, when I was there Storing had a grant from the Ford Foundation and four or five of us had fellowships, and we went through all the founding documents for a year. That later became the basis for his own writings and editing of the anti-Federalist Papers. I got the impression that Strauss admired Storing. He even contributed to the *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics* that Storing edited.²⁰ Storing had a horrible time or a difficult time with the publisher, who said that Strauss's paragraphs were too long.

¹⁶ Abram Shulsky studied with Strauss at the University of Chicago. He has held numerous positions in the U.S. government, at the RAND corporation, and the Hudson Institute. An interview with Shulsky is part of this collection of reminiscences of former Strauss students.

¹⁷ Peter Geach (1916-2013), British Catholic philosopher, professor of logic at Leeds University, 1966-1981.

¹⁸ Francis Perkins (1880-1965), U.S. Secretary of Labor from 1933-1945.

¹⁹ James Farley (1888-1976), Democratic politician who served as Postmaster General under Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1933-1940.

²⁰ *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics*, ed. Herbert J. Storing (NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1962).

Storing had to explain that some people just thought that way: you have the paragraphs the way they were. Still, I don't think he knew that was going into politics. I didn't know myself at the time. I think he would have supported it. I remember he was very interested in foreign policy, and I think the neocons did him a great disservice by treating him as if he were one of their own. Irving Kristol²¹ was responsible for that, and I never felt he [Strauss] was that kind of conservative. I think the person he respected most on foreign policy was Raymond Aron.²² I remember that his views of the Cuban missile crisis were sort of similar to Raymond Aron's. But I don't believe that Strauss was an interventionist. I think he was more realistic, and many of his students were; I remember there's a fellow name Tom Schrock²³ who would be interested. Is he in there?

GM: Yes, I've interviewed him, yes.

JB: Did you ask him about the Vietnam War?

GM: No, I didn't. Perhaps I'll have to revisit that.

JB: Well, a number of us were—Butterworth²⁴ was part of this, I think. Kirk Emmert.

GM: I know the name, but I've never met him.

JB: Oh, you should talk to him. He's at Kenyon,²⁵ just retired. He is the mayor of Kenyon and Gambier is a small town so you'd have no trouble finding him. We were talking to Tom on the lawn and he was kind of leading the conversation, and we concluded that we were against the Vietnam War because we wouldn't win. This was pretty early; this is in 1964, '65, like that. So we had this perception that it was a bad war. I don't know what the position of the neocons was on Vietnam, but you can imagine they might have supported it; I don't know. But they certainly supported the somewhat parallel case in Iraq.

I don't know what Strauss would have thought about that. It would be quite interesting if you could find out. I bet that he said something to somebody about it. I just don't think he was a neocon. Have you read the Zuckerts'²⁶ book? Have you interviewed the Zuckerts?

GM: No, not yet.

²¹ Irving Kristol: see "People."

²² Raymond Aron (1905-1983), French social thinker and critic.

²³ Thomas Schrock: see "People."

²⁴ Charles Butterworth: see "People"

²⁵ Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. Emmert is professor emeritus of political science at Kenyon College.

²⁶ Catherine H. and Michael P. Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). For Michael Zuckert: see "People." Catherine H. Zuckert is Nancy Reeves Dreux Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame.

JB: Oh, you must. They wrote a book on *The Truth about Leo Strauss*.

GM: Right, exactly.

JB: Which I tend to agree with. They critique the east coast Straussians and the west coast Straussians. Cathy Zuckert is absolutely brilliant. Her first year at Chicago she did her master's thesis in a year on some Greek dialogue, and she learned Greek at the same time, all in a year. She has the incredible books like *Postmodern Platos*,²⁷ which . . . Strauss. Butterworth knows a lot about this. At the time I studied with him [Strauss], he wasn't hiding it, but he didn't really emphasize his connection to Heidegger, which was complicated and one could perhaps understand why. I mean, not only Heidegger's reputation at the time, but also the fact that perhaps his students would have had to know more about German philosophy. No, I won't give him that excuse. He didn't really talk much about Heidegger, so when I read Heidegger later on and then took Strauss's course on Nietzsche (which is something I took it by reading the transcripts; I've studied Kant and Nietzsche by reading the transcripts and doing the assignment, and listened to discussion). It was later on, then, that I realized this evolution from Nietzsche and what he learned for Husserl, and then his thinking through Heidegger. Hannah Arendt was there at Chicago at the same time. I wish I had taken a course from her, because I don't know what Strauss's relationship with her was. But it would be interesting because they had of course in many ways parallel experiences.

GM: When you mentioned in connection with the neocons that Strauss wasn't that kind of conservative, how might you characterize what kind of conservative he was?

JB: I'm not sure I could in American terms. I was wanting to think maybe he was a *National Review* conservative, but that's wrong. I don't know. I mean, he certainly was conservative and he was critical of John F. Kennedy. But I don't know if he would have been sympathetic to Goldwater or any of the other—certainly not to Lyndon Johnson. I don't know if there was any politician at the time he would line up with.

GM: Maybe a broader sort of conservatism—

JB: Well, conservatism has all sorts of iterations.

GM: Skepticism about the possibility of ultimate transformation of the human condition, that sort of thing?

JB: Oh, I see.

GM: And the kind of anti-Baconian element in his thought, you might say.

²⁷ *Postmodern Platos: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Strauss, Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

JB: The ultimate transformation of the human condition?

GM: Well, I was thinking of the whole project of modern natural science that there could be the relief of man's estate, that you could see—

JB: Well, I think he supported, I argue—okay, that's a good point. I guess he was a sort of defender of natural rights conservatism because he thought it was the best practical alternative. But he didn't really agree with John Locke or Jefferson. He was defender of liberal democracy. Maybe the word conservative doesn't really help in describing it.

GM: It confuses it a little, doesn't it?

JB: Well, maybe I shouldn't say *National Review* conservative, but there's all sorts—I tend to think they're more sensible than the *Weekly Standard*. But that's now, and that's me. There are a host of people, like William Buckley and Willmoore Kendall and some of the others at the *National Review* who drew together the conservative movement at the time. I can't see him in terms of any identification with a contemporary figure unless you were to look at what Raymond Aron wrote, which I don't remember. I never read it, I just know that he respected—he would say this is what Raymond Aron wrote about the Cuban missile crisis or something like that. So then of course there's no reason why he should identify with any kind of American conservative. He's not an American. I mean, he came to America fairly late in his career. Why would you think he would be—you could explain him by relating him to some contemporary figure.

All I know, I was really shocked when I had lunch with Irving Kristol and somebody else and got his take on Strauss. Oh, my gosh, this is not the man I know. If you interview the Zuckerts, you ought to cut out this whole conversation when you talk to the Zuckerts about it. They know this issue much better than I do. I know Mike and I were both against the intervention in Iraq for the same reason I had been against the intervention in Vietnam: we didn't think it was realistic. And Lugar was skeptical of it, too. This notion that you go in and overthrow a dictator and people would rise up and say: We're free, and thank you America—I mean, we just thought that was nuts. But I couldn't put words in Strauss's mouth.

GM: That's helpful, to see the diversity of points of view that are connected with Strauss's students. There really appears to be no coherent school of thought, you might say, apart from the point that you made earlier about Strauss's deep engagement with the text and not having a specific conclusion that he wanted to arrive at.

JB: Well, also too, the notion of *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. That was a big one. Of course, no one else other than students of Strauss was teaching that to people at the time, and that was huge. His interpretation of the *Republic* and the *City and Man* was a huge eye-opener to me—that actually the *Republic* is about the impossibility of a philosopher-king, and the reason is there's a tension between eros and justice. That's had a deep influence on my thinking. I actually learned that from Walter Berns, who learned it from Strauss, but that's really very important. Then reading the text for the secret

meaning. In modern times, it might just be to protect the author from persecution, but in ancient times, there was a notion that some teachings weren't meant for everybody.

I remember Butterworth and I, and Kirk Emmert, we took a course from Muhsin Mahdi²⁸ on the *Arabian Nights*. It was at the downtown school; and so we went through the whole Alfarabi as well, and the whole Muslim notion, the whole Muslim teaching which was similar to Plato's, I guess you could say, in that respect. And my students at Georgetown, many of them, although they were taking American government and public policy courses from me, many of them have philosophical interests. They're trying to reconcile Plato and Aquinas because they're serious Catholics. So I get in a lot of discussions with them related to what I learned from Strauss. But with a couple of exceptions, I never really taught political theory.

GM: But it sounds like it's very much informed your thinking, your study of it.

JB: Well, I think so, because I think there's kind of a hidden philosophical question behind every practical subject. For example, climate change, which I'm teaching now. What's just? What do we owe to future generations? What do we owe to people in Africa? What do they demand from us? When you look—when I went into the Senate to work there, I became quickly aware of the we would call the moral questions, but more accurately I would say philosophical questions that are behind many of the debates you have in the Senate, like healthcare, climate change, even the budget. I remember asking Alice Rivlin²⁹ once: Is running up the debt a form of fiscal child abuse? She said: Oh, you people from Indiana, you're always trying to make something into a moral question—which is ironic because she was from South Bend. But so, I would always—I'd be perceiving we would call it the moral question behind many of the issues that the Senate was debating. And that was a difference that I'm sure related to my studies with Strauss and Walter Berns. Walter Berns—before he passed away, we had a wonderful kind of friendship because he was here in Washington. I don't know if you've talked to Irene.

GM: I have only on the phone, yes.

JB: So I saw Walter not too long before he passed away. His mind was very sharp. I suppose he was interviewed earlier on?

GM: Yes, he was.

JB: That's good. Bloom probably never was.

GM: No, a number of people were not. Joe Cropsey was not interviewed, George Anastaplo.³⁰

²⁸ Muhsin Mahdi: see "People."

²⁹ Alice Rivlin (b. 1931), economist with expertise in federal budgets.

³⁰ George Anastaplo: see "People."

JB: I went to George Anastaplo's thesis defense and Strauss was a member of the committee. And he was trying to persuade the committee to agree with his view of the First Amendment, and he was making a real heavy pitch to Strauss, and it was an odd sort of dissertation. You're supposed to respond to their questions; he was actually trying to persuade them that he was right.

GM: A real lawyer in him.

JB: Exactly. Strauss said: Only for this afternoon, Mr. Anastaplo. I was walking back with George for some reason, walking back to his apartment. We just happened to head in the same direction. He opened his mailbox and there was this letter from the Committee on Social Thought that said: Mr. Anastaplo, your dissertation has been accepted. Your defense is scheduled for May XX, and will you please submit the manuscript. So that's the only way they got him to stop, because he kept working on this thing. His book, the dissertation was like 1600 pages long or some ridiculous amount, half of them single-spaced footnotes. Yeah, that's a shame. Kirk Emmert would be good to talk to, and the Zuckerts especially. It would be interesting to see about the Zuckerts, though, because they not only were with Strauss but they also have studied him forever after he passed away. So you might to separate out what you learned about him after they studied with him. Tom Pangle is another one. He was probably in the original group.

GM: This has been very helpful. Is there anything you want to say looking back on Strauss's influence on you or his legacy more broadly speaking?

JB: Well, yes. He taught me how to read a book.

GM: That's what so many people have said.

JB: I think he taught me that politics was an honorable profession. I think the most important thing he taught me is to be a perpetual learner. Never stop at where you're at. Just move forward. I think that would probably be the most important things he taught me.

GM: That sounds terrific.

JB: You asked me to sum up. You asked me what I most remember about Leo Strauss. I think perhaps the one thing I haven't said yet about him is that he always taught you to understand other thinkers the way they understood themselves, as if you were an anthropologist studying a tribe. You have to really understand that person, that tribe. And so when a student would sort of jump to conclusions about a thing that they disagreed with, he [Strauss] would slow them down and say: Wait a minute, why do you think that person said what he said or thought what he thought? A saying he would say: You would have to fatten the goose before you kill it.

The other thing I think I didn't mention enough was the Straussian quest for nature. I think that what was really behind his thinking. He did believe that there was something

essential about a human being, that you could recapture the essential human being. And the way you would do that would be to go back and start at the beginning—which is maybe what he learned from Heidegger—but start from the beginning and try to find an essential human nature. I think that influenced his own thinking about liberal democracy, because I don't think he was optimistic or pessimistic about liberal democracy. I think he was realistic about liberal democracy. And I think he thought that history was cyclical, at least in the sense that while there was always a threat of barbarism, we would eventually sort of recover. He wasn't optimistic about the fate of liberal democracy, but he wasn't pessimistic either; and I think he thought liberal democracy was the best regime for modern man. I think he would think that it was at least in contemporary times something that was good for all peoples, although I think he would have been aware of the difficulty of imposing a liberal democratic regime on others. That's why I'm skeptical of the claim that he a neoconservative. But he did want to go back to nature, and particularly go back to an understanding of virtue and good character and good habits.

I think one of the important things I learned from him personally was the necessity of getting your soul in order about thinking, the same way that your emotions led you to, which is a difficult thing to do and perhaps a lifetime quest. But it's what I try to teach my students who are very interested in moral questions. I also try, as I mentioned before, to bring moral issues to bear in my teaching and my research, because behind every practical question like climate change or healthcare or even the deficit, as I mentioned, there are a lot of questions of justice and fairness that need to be addressed. So while I appreciate the teaching of the *Republic* that eros and justice are two different things, I'm sort of more on the Aristotelian side of the fence, that you need to somehow bring those things together as a practical matter. That's what I wanted to say.

GM: Excellent. Thank you.