Interview with Robert Faulkner
January 20, 2013

Stephen Gregory: How did you first come to know Leo Strauss?

Robert Faulkner: I'd heard of him from a great fellow named Herbert Garfinkel,[1] who taught for a while at Dartmouth College. He said if I wanted to study political theory, the place to go was Chicago. I then went off to Oxford for a couple of years on a Marshall Scholarship, but having read the *Natural Right and History* chapter on Hobbes, my original inclination was confirmed and off I went to Chicago. The first semester I had a seminar on Hegel with Strauss. I think it was lectures on *The Philosophy of History*. It wasn't until the second semester that I suddenly realized my ignorance, under the influence of his teaching.

SG: And this would have been what year?

RF: It would have been the year '58, '59 at Chicago.

SG: Right. Okay. And you studied at Chicago for—

RF: I left, if I recall properly in '62, the spring of '62, and began teaching at Princeton that fall.

SG: And what were your first impressions? Well, your first impression of Leo Strauss was the Hobbes chapter in *Natural Right and History*, but your first presentation of the man himself was in that Hegel class in the autumn of 1958?

RF: Yes. I'm sure I didn't impress him on Hegel. In fact, I remember I read a paper that was probably 50 percent too long and it was cut off at the proper time, after twenty minutes. And I didn't—it wasn't until second semester that I had a really strong impression, and that's no doubt due to me. But also Hegel is hard for a nice boy from upstate New York to enter into well, and it was a struggle for me.

First impression: In the spring class, I remember him walking down the aisle in a large bowl-shaped room. And I remember the mixture of impishness and seriousness—mostly seriousness, as far as I saw. A small man, soft, without any pretension, but going about what appeared to be very serious work. That's the best I can do to start with.

SG: Right. And you were in the Political Science Department?

RF: Yes.

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[1] Herbert Garfinkle became the founding dean of Michigan State University's James Madison College, which concentrates on public affairs and international relations within the model of a liberal education. He is the author of *When Negroes March* (The Free Press, 1959).

SG: And began work on a Master's in 1959?

RF: Yes, I guess so. I don't remember exactly when it must have been. Yes, I did a Master's thesis. He had—he gave me extremely good advice, which I ignored. The good advice was: Work on the classical republicans—that is, the seventeenth-century sect called classical republicans. Zera Fink[2] has written on them and I looked into them later. It would have been a very good topic for me, really a good topic for me. It was in English; my language skills are not terrific. It would have taken me into this Machiavellian turn of the republican doctrine, which would have been very interesting. Instead, I, having worked on Locke and being very interested in a comparison with Richard Hooker, ended up writing a M.A. thesis on Hooker. But I did do that under him.

SG: And why did you think he made this particular recommendation to you?

RF: I think he saw it was an important topic, perhaps just coming into fashion in the English-speaking world. And I think he thought probably it was suitable for my abilities. I was not a scholar of Greek. I was very interested in his teaching, but—I'll leave it at that. I think he thought it was suitable for me, and I think it probably would have been.

SG: Strauss typically taught his class at Chicago by having a short passage of text read. He would comment on it; he would invite questions. This is what you experienced?

RF: Yes, yes.

SG: Had you ever seen a class conducted that way before?

RF: No. It was a terrific relief. The one thing you leave out of your description is these wonderful summaries in putting the book or the passage or the doctrine in context at the beginning of his classes—or sometimes in the middle of the classes, suddenly there would be a wonderful sort of riff. But it wasn't an extraneous riff; it was a remark, a digested account. But still, what you say is correct. No, the teachers I had had at Oxford, Isaiah Berlin[3] and others, Plamenatz[4]—respectable people, but they lectured and wanted to give a kind of comprehensive

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[2] Zera S. Fink (d. 1979) was a graduate student and then a faculty member at Northwestern University until his retirement in 1970. He is the author of *The Classical Republicans* (Northwestern University Press, 1945).

[3] Sir Isaiah Berlin (d. 1997) spent his academic career at Oxford, where he helped found and became the first president of Wolfson College. A political theorist, historian of ideas, and noted essayist, Berlin is the author of numerous works, including *The Age of Enlightenment: The Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New American Library, 1956).

[4] John Petrov Plamenatz (d. 1975) spent most of his academic career at Oxford, where he taught political theory. He is the author of, among other works, *Man & Society. A Critical Examination of Some Important Social & Political Theories from Machiavelli to Marx* (London: Longmans, 1963).

account of their own and they didn't exactly comment on the text. Strauss led one to see how penetrating the text was and how it went past the student's original impressions. That was maybe the greatest lesson.

SG: That he showed you the context, the surface, and then took you beyond the surface?

RF: Correct. And, you could say, brought out often the radicalness of what appeared—[what] to the inexperienced student might have appeared as just another argument. But Strauss could bring out its significance. And that came from his deep experience of other teachings. And thus he could bring out the distinctiveness of this and the bite. That's what I had not had before either as an undergraduate studying with historically-oriented scholars or at Oxford. The scholars I mentioned are historically oriented, sort of—they thought they could give a complete account of the place of this thinker in history.

SG: After doing your Master's on Locke and Hooker—

RF: Yep.

SG: Then you very quickly moved on to the stage of writing a Ph.D.?

RF: Quickly? I'm delighted to hear that judgment. And yes, I did, and directly did. And I had doubts about whether I was good enough to write in philosophy, frankly. And I was very impressed, as I think almost all of Strauss's students were, with the wonderful teacher Herbert Storing[5]. So while taking all of Strauss's classes, I nevertheless wrote, in the field of American jurisprudence, a dissertation and eventually a book on Chief Justice Marshall.

But I was not long into that when I saw that I needed something more searching than the constitutional lawyers, or maybe I just couldn't remember all the cases well. But I think it's, I think it's perhaps in this case even truer to say I was dissatisfied. Bluntly put, I would have to bring a lot to Marshall; if I were studying a serious thinker or philosopher, they would give me a lot. I would have to rise to their level.

SG: Strauss was on your committee?

RF: Yes.

SG: And did he give you feedback on your dissertation?

RF: Not much, but that was my fault. There was very little hand-holding by anybody on my committee. And basically I went away and, I'd like to say, wrote my dissertation. I think it would be truer to say: with my wife's help wrote my dissertation. And it was pretty much in finished form when I handed it in to Herbert Storing, to his surprise.

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[5] Herbert J. Storing: see "People Mentioned in the Interviews" [hereafter "People].

SG: Before you went away, you served for a time as an assistant?

RF: I did.

SG: And what was that like.

RF: A joy.

SG: Well, what were your duties as an assistant to Leo Strauss?

RF: Well, let me just indicate their importance. So I'd walk into Strauss's study on a very hot day, and he is sweating and wiping his brow. And he says, "Mr. Faulkner, Mr. Faulkner, can't you do something about this awful heat?" So I walked to the window and threw it up and a great breath of fresh air came in, and Strauss's reaction: "Mr. Faulkner, you are a genius." By the way, he never said that otherwise.

I do not remember heavy duties—getting books and that sort of thing. I would do some typing for him. My typing was execrable. It was awful, but I did that. I would turn a manuscript or a dictation into text. Not an awful lot, frankly. That was one task. Generally I was not running many books. It was accompanying him: taking him to the train for lectures; taking him downtown once a year in order to get a suit, maybe two suits, a shirt, a tie at a nice gentleman's small haberdashery down on the north end. Such tasks as that, and then the pleasure of walking him back to his apartment after class. That was of course a wonderful privilege.

SG: And on these occasions, walking him back from class or going to the haberdashers, what did he like to talk about?

RF: I mean, he would talk a bit about what he had been teaching. That was a very great pleasure. I'm sure I could have taken greater advantage of such occasions. But he was very—he was very easy to talk with. He was not—I never saw him really truculent or really moody or something, unless he had an appointment with the dentist. He hated the pain of the dentist. He was very sensitive. Delicate body. Not one, to put it mildly, given to exercise, so his walks home were very slow. And I'm sure his relatively early death, you know, must have reflected that to some extent. I've not further answered your question.

He would have remarks about people, about others. Frankly, I do not, I'm ashamed to say, remember closely detailed conversations with him in that context.

SG: Sure, of course. What—the classes you attended, those were held in Social Sciences 122? Social Sciences 302?

RF: I don't remember the numbers. The seminar room, of course, was different from a large bowled room. There would be a lot of students, except in a class—say a seminar on Cicero, when probably there were not more than fifteen of us at most. Ten of us, maybe.

SG: And there was—there was a sense among the ten of you for a seminar on Cicero, or perhaps more for a course on Hegel—there was sense that this was something unusual happening—his teaching? It wasn't your judgment alone.

RF: Oh, God no. Oh, No. Everyone—after all, his classes were being recorded. No other class that I attended was recorded. And we were—I knew we knew we were in the presence of something extraordinary. It's not extraordinary in the sense of something spectacular with fireworks and amusement and all sorts of things. I'll bet Bloom[6] was that kind of teacher—it was sort of a spectacle as well as rich with inquiry. Strauss's was more quiet. But he had a trait—I've mentioned this in other contexts—but he had a trait that none but the best have, which is a kind of ruthless following of the argument of the text, and therefore one was gaining illuminating remarks about the movement of the text. At the same time, one was gaining particular insights into parts of the argument. So something very important was going on and we, at least I, had never had it before—before I woke up to this my second semester at Chicago.

SG: One thing I'd like to ask about is what Strauss understood his role as teacher to be. What did he think he was doing?

RF: The most important thing he was doing was showing his students the depth and originality of a serious thinker. So overcoming historicism, I would say, was the tacit—was a very great concern of his. So as I've said in another context, there was much less of raising objections to a thinker. There was absolutely no dismissal of a serious thinker. Hegel had to be understood on his own terms. And when a naïve student like myself raised questions of whether Hegel accurately portrayed an age, Strauss discouraged that very much. It's not that he discouraged his students' originality, but their originality on the whole was so light and so secondary that he really wanted them to be sure they saw the argument of the text. That was the obviously most important part. But it had a very deep, deep resonance. It meant that—it meant that one read to learn, or at least one was encouraged to read to learn and to take these arguments seriously.

Strauss knew that few of us would be what would be called philosophic in some grand way. But many of us boys could make progress in thinking by considering the different alternatives of the great men. And that was, I think, the very healthy thing he encouraged, and that could apply to students at many levels of ability. And it encouraged at once a kind of humility and at the same time an ambition to make what progress one could.

SG: What was his basic attitude towards his students? It seems natural, in the case of Strauss, to say that he had students—that these were not people who took his classes but people who wanted in particular to learn something from him, I guess.

RF: Yeah. I think the most important thing is he took them seriously. And he took their aspirations seriously, and therefore he took their objections and questions and doubts seriously. Having said that, I would say he was really concerned himself to learn, and he was really admiring of those who were serious about learning and had the gear to really do it well. Some

[6] Allan Bloom: see "People."

people, I think, might have thought he had favorites. For example, there was a man, whose name I've now forgotten, who took care of the recording and such. I did not think he played favorites. I thought [when] he was in the classroom he was open to questions from wherever it came from, any point of view. He never made fun of a questioner. So my first impulse in reaction to your question was, well, he was friendly. That's such a shallow remark, but he was friendly because he meant the best for them and was happy to help them out. But there was a tacit reserve because he was about very important business, including investigating, in his teaching. And that was the most important thing. It's not that he was preoccupied with his students. I would not say that.

SG: Did he show insight into the character of his students—what they needed to understand or what they did understand?

RF: Oh, I think so. I mentioned the example of me: he thought a certain study would be appropriate for me. He said at one time he was sort of pleased; he thought that he had helped me understand things that my character felt, but which I didn't understand and couldn't explain or justify. I thought that was a very, a very impressive remark.

SG: His remark, approximately, was that he helped you understand things that you felt but couldn't express?

RF: That's right.

SG: That your character—

RF: and defend, you could also say.

SG: That your character was disposed towards seeing certain kinds of things but couldn't articulate or defend those things that you could see?

RF: That's a very clear statement.

SG: And so he applied some practical discrimination towards his judgments and dealings with students?

RF: Oh sure. He would—

SG: The point here is, to use a word I've heard Ralph Lerner[7] use many times, he wasn't a *luftmensch*—his head wasn't in the clouds.

RF: No. No, no, no. His head was not in the clouds. Not on politics, not on idealism—despite his very great admiration for decent people, he knew the limitation of that in politics. He was, in a way, very tough. But his toughness was never callousness. I'll quote one wonderful remark that

[7] Ralph Lerner: see "People."

he made after he had sent a letter to the *National Review*[8] protesting their treatment of Israel in a certain matter: "I like oil," he said, "but I like Jews more."

SG: So Strauss's teaching—his hopes for his teaching were that he would encourage a kind of activity that he himself was engaging in to the best of his ability, to the highest degree? That's what he—if he had a project, that was his project?

RF: I'd go a long way with that formulation. He cared for us because he cared for thinking things out and the benefits of that for us. One can push that a bit farther than you did, and that is the caring for us and for his students was in the light of an awareness of the obstacles to clear thinking and to decent conduct, or at least an understanding of decent conduct in the present time. And therefore he no doubt wanted, cared to have his teaching have some influence. That's not strange. But that was not his principal motive, it seemed to me. He was a thinker, and was concerned to think things out. I'm not sure what to think of Heinrich Meier's[9] interesting argument that Strauss wanted to found a school.

Strauss seemed to think that a serious thinker would inevitably have followers. And that was to some extent problematic—that there would be a sect, and there would be a division of sects then, as different people understood him differently. And he regarded that as inevitable. In a way problematic; but as he put it in one of his writings: better a sect than the republic of letters in which all kinds of differences are tolerated but muddled and muffled so that we all get along. He really meant to think things out and thought that it was inevitable that people who did try to think things out would be followed. The extent to which he intentionally wanted to found a school in a somewhat different sense than I've just expressed in the last few remarks, I'm not sure of that. I'm just not—I'm not sure of what that means.

SG: During his lifetime in debates in his own department and in other departments, and in literature and among his own students, he would have heard the word "Straussian."

RF: Probably. Sure.

SG: And he would have been aware there were conversations among his students about what it meant to be a "quote unquote Straussian," and who was the legitimate heir to Leo Strauss. In so far as he was—I'm asking you to read his mind—but in so far as he was aware of that this was brewing, what do you think his stance towards it was?

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[8] The letter, published in the Jan. 5, 1956 edition of the *National Review*, complained of the magazine being opposed to the state of Israel. One sentence reads: "But the country is poor, lacks oil and many other things which fetch much money; the venture on which the country rests may well appear to be quixotic; the university and the government buildings are within easy reach of Jordanian guns; the possibility of disastrous defeat or failure is obvious and always close."

[9] Heinrich Meier: see "People."

RF: He was too busy to get too much involved on the gossip front. I'm putting it that crudely. I think he knew that he had a variety of serious students. He had some confidence in them. That there would be less serious students and mistaken ones, and the serious students might differ in some ways—I think he would have just understood that as part of the inevitabilities of a great teacher and his followers. I never saw any grave concerns about what his students—about fears or apprehensions or zeal about what his students were doing. I never saw that. That some of his students might really do foolish things? Yeah, he could understand that. There were students who didn't understand a lot or who took his teaching in one way or the other, sure. But his mode of teaching, which was taking the variety of points of view seriously and therefore ventilating a variety of opinions as his students took different courses—that discouraged, it seemed to me, foolish zealotry.

On the other hand, he was not shy, upon occasion at least, in clarifying the differences between the different modern thinkers and, not least, the moderns and the ancients. He was not always pushing the ancients; that's not the case. But his opinion that modern thought might have grave difficulties in its foundations, that certainly came through and not just in his writing. So that's a different element. That has to be said as well as what I'm saying.

SG: I believe you've remarked that he sometimes referred to his students as his puppies.

RF: Yes.

SG: What's packed into such a description?

RF: Oh, not much. It was playful. Strauss was as un-neurotic—I've never even thought of using the word in conjunction—as un-neurotic as about anyone I've ever known. There must have been problematic relations with this or that student—of course there were, and I've heard rumors about this break. But it was pretty rare. Very rare. And on the whole, relations with him—people were not fraught, nothing like it. People may have felt that it was fraught but as far as I could see, Strauss was not—to use this colloquialism—fraught about his relations with students, not at all: he had bigger fish to fry.

SG: Right. So if there was any turmoil surrounding him, it was something that students brought with them to what Strauss had to offer, not something that Strauss was introducing?

RF: I am convinced of that.

SG. Right.

RF: He was impish. He was warm. He was friendly. But fundamentally, he was austere about what he thought was the most serious business a man could be about. And therefore, from that point of view, then other things fell into place. I mean, he might have—he might make a mistake here and there. I never saw him make a mistake in dealing with people, but I didn't see all his

intimate relations with Bloom, Rosen[10] —other people who were before my time, like Benardete,[11] or for that matter, Jaffa.[12]

SG: Sure. Strauss had this remarkable influence on you as a student and on your career, yet your publications have been mostly about things that he never taught, and I doubt that you ever had a chance to study with him. Marshall, in the first instance, and then Hooker;[13] I believe you've written on the First Amendment. Strauss did have something to say about liberalism but—in his courses—but I don't think he taught a course in liberalism itself. How do you understand that? I mean was your—was there some influence that appeared in the things you worked on, even if you didn't study them with Strauss?

RF: Oh, yes. Oh, sure.

SG: How does that—this is an interesting question in general, because among Strauss's students there are—including you, of course—there are a number who turned to studying American founding, American political thought and political theory, and made remarkable contributions to the field in understanding America.

RF: That's important to appreciate that.

SG: And Strauss never taught this, but nevertheless this is one of the great legacies of—if there is a Straussian school, one of the great legacies of Strauss's teaching is to somehow inspire people to do work that he himself wasn't doing or teaching.

RF: Yeah, yeah. Well, one can give a different account for each of the big things I've done. The stuff on America which people like Marty Diamond,[14] and the wonderful Walter Berns, and Jaffa's marvelous work on Lincoln, and such things—those were all inspired by Strauss because he encouraged one to take politics seriously, and that means thoughtful political men seriously. And he also taught about the formative character of a regime. And therefore the founders, the turn to the founders, is not just an accident. It could be overdone, in fact, but there is a kind of impulse to see, to understand the form of our country, which to some extent was expressed in that original Constitution which is our fundamental law. Also he taught one to take law seriously, and that included custom. So again, that pointed people like Walter Berns[15] and others, and

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[10] Stanley H. Rosen: see "People."

[11] Seth Benardete: see "People."

[12] Harry V. Jaffa: see "People."

[13] *The Jurisprudence of John Marshall* (Greenwood Press: Westport, 1980; reprint of edition of Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1968), and *Richard Hooker and the Politics of a Christian England* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1981).

[14] Martin Diamond: see "People."

[15] Walter Berns: see "People."

myself. One cannot neglect the importance of Herbert Storing, who had two immense assets: first, he took the country very seriously; and second, he insisted on interpreting it in a non-tendentious or non-Straussian way, so to speak.

We weren't reading it with a view to the ancients or something. One had to see how the country was founded as it was founded and examine that, but taking it seriously. That too was Strauss's fundamental impulse. So that influenced me via Storing, especially, who was my dissertation advisor. The Hooker book was for me very interesting, because having left American things, hungry for some broader—I had done some work on Hooker. It also allowed me to comment—Hooker's was a Christian Aristotelianism, and I could investigate Aristotle without being exactly responsible for being a first-rate classics scholar. That, actually, was very useful at the time. And that's a good book, despite the fact that it's far out of the fashionable topics.

One thing you didn't mention which is very important for me was a book on Francis Bacon.[16] And that was inspired by Strauss's remarks about the importance of the turn in philosophy toward an activist or useful philosophy that could help human beings. Useful knowledge, in Benjamin Franklin's phrase. I was stimulated by that, and then just fascinated by Bacon. And Strauss said somewhere that it's not worth working on Bacon because he's so complicated and difficult, it would take so long. Well, he was right but it was suitable for me. And he also said that it was important to understand natural science. Well, Bacon's really interesting on that.

But still, the fundamental—I suppose the most obvious sign of the influence—was the last book on *The Case For Greatness*,[17] which is an investigation of magnanimity or greatness of soul or ambition, looking at Plato and Xenophon and beginning with grand old Aristotle. And that was sort of a boy growing up with the confidence to confront big topics, and at the same time take up also the arguments against that by whomever they're by, whether it's by Rawls, or by Kant, or whomever. So I don't see myself as by any means freed from the influence of Strauss.

SG: Ambition, great-souled ambition or otherwise, this is something that Strauss inspired in his students?

RF: Yes, that's quite true.

SG. I'll just leave it at that.

RF: Yeah, you can see that. There's a book on the role of the neo-cons in the invasion of Iraq and such by a guy named Mann. And I looked at it because it was said at the time, especially by enemies of Strauss, that somehow the Straussians were decisive. James Mann in that book, I think it's called *The Vulcans*,[18] investigates that, and I think shows that the influence was only

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[16] *Francis Bacon and the Project of Progress* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1993).

[17] *The Case for Greatness: Honorable Ambition and Its Critics* (Yale University Press, 2007).

[18] *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (Penguin Books, 2004).

this: that there was a certain confidence in statesmanship or leadership that to some extent infused some of the Straussians. The teaching or the outlook of people like Wolfowitz[19] and others seemed to me to be not Strauss. There is a certain kind of excessive—you could almost say patriotism that's present there, or ambition for our liberal democracy that I thought Strauss would have thought impolitic and impractical. But at the same time, he encouraged people, especially decent and well-meaning people, to be ambitious in the best sense, to do important things and to take on then important thinkers in another way.

SG: Did Strauss discuss American politics with you at all during the time you knew him?

RF: Very little. And little or no time in class.

SG: What is your suspicion or your intuition on what his politics might have been, if he had any?

RF: Oh, he did have a politics. But I would say generally he feared the softness of the people we call modern liberals. He feared it, so he would be called a conservative, I think. But his thought on politics was so much deeper than the various schools of conservatism. He thought that it was very important to have decent, honorable, judicious people in power. That, I would say, would be the most general thing. But a certain toughness in foreign policy—not necessarily imperial, but strong. He feared the power of the Soviet Union and worried that America might be too soft to take them on. After all, there was a grave problem for a long time. And the turn to Reagan in 1980, with a new and tougher foreign policy, was many years after Strauss had died.

SG: Right. Strauss's suspicion of the softness of liberals—this is soft-headedness with regards towards expectations for foreign policy, or does it extend to suspicions about the wisdom of the welfare state? I mean, what's comprised in that softness?

RF: He rarely ventilated such matters, and did not with me. I do recall once evincing some naively tendentious remark about FDR, and Strauss corrected me: FDR had been remarkable in foreseeing the rise of Hitler and in moving this country to confront that. And as far as I knew, he was a—no, I don't want to say an admirer of Truman, I don't know that, I don't want to say that. I am, but I don't know that he was. But, you know, he for example thought that Nixon was very impressive in a number of ways and didn't go along with the terrific denigration of Nixon which was fashionable in the academy at that time—which is not to say he celebrated Watergate or celebrated the man's character fully or something like that. He did not.

SG: Strauss came to the United States a German émigré and with, I understand, relatively little experience as a teacher.

RF: Yep.

SG: Do you think his experience of the United States changed him in any significant way?

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[19] Paul Wolfowitz: see "People."

RF: I would guess so. Not in his fundamental being: this is a man who from the time that he said his ambition was to read Plato and raise rabbits was remarkably devoted to thinking things out. But in this sense, he said he loved the American flag. He had an eye and an ear for America's funny ways. He loved the informality of the slang. He once pointed out in class the genius of FDR in changing a Latinate long word for a very pungent Anglo-Saxon short word. Not a swear word, just a pungent remark. And [he] just saw the terrific discrimination of FDR in rhetoric, in popular rhetoric. Very impressive. He was impressed with that.

He loved Perry Mason.[20] And so some of the informality of American life he liked. He was very proper, however. So the later—the informality of the '60s plus, he thought was—what did he call it at one time? America's burning while the social scientist fiddled?[21] He saw it burning. He saw—he did predict it, but he also saw it with his own eyes. That this strange mixture of Heidegger and liberalism into something called liberation in many, many respects could tear down, could deeply damage the constitutional and liberal structure of the country.

SG: I understand. Was there any model for the way that Strauss taught classes? I can't imagine, if, you know, somehow there had been the possibility of him staying in Germany at a German university. Does anyone in a German university conduct classes in the same way that Strauss did?

RF: I don't really know. I thought he was influenced by German professors who would take up a text and really look at it closely. The big difference, though, the decisive difference is that he had broken from the historical school, and therefore—and that was bound to have a big effect on the way he read these books. But you know, he would talk with Voegelin[22] and talk with other German friends of his, and I think they were more accustomed to looking at texts really well and closely—that German intellectual tradition and German academic tradition.
SG: I was wondering if somehow being in the United States was liberating for him in a way. The way in which he approached his teaching, was this something that was *sui generis*?

RF: Let's put it this way. I never heard any nostalgia for somewhere else. It was remarkable. I never heard him comparing American universities to German universities, which he might very well have done. Talking of, somehow, of the shallowness of American universities—nothing of that. That isn't exactly the question you asked, but now that you mention it, it's in a way strange.

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[20] Perry Mason was a defense attorney in the detective fiction of Earle Stanley Gardner who became the subject of a long-running TV drama.

[21] The chapter "An Epilogue" by Leo Strauss in *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics,* ed. Herbert J. Storing (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), concludes: "Only a great fool would call the new political science diabolic: it has no attributes peculiar to fallen angels. It is not even Machiavellian, for Machiavelli's teaching was graceful, subtle, and colorful. Nor is it Neronian. Nevertheless, one may say of it that it fiddles while Rome burns. It is excused by two facts: it does not know that it fiddles, and it does not know that Rome burns."

[22] Eric Voegelin: see "People."

I mean, his writing in English is just extraordinary: the clarity and grace and the possibility of summoning up extraordinarily pungent remarks. Somehow what one could only call his genius just absorbed that. And he was living not just in the moment, as we say today, but he was living for the life that he could live. And he remarked once: "You know, you don't have to have a big house or something. Look at Spinoza. He lived in one tiny, little apartment, grinding lenses to make a living." And I think that caught Strauss's own attitude. There are all kinds of disadvantages and terrible dangers out there. One does one's work as one can.

My own opinion is that his remarkable aversion to getting involved in the Holocaust and thinking about it, and thinking about victims and such, has something to do with this. This extraordinary, you could say love of life, so long as that's understood well.

SG: It's easy to see the deficiencies of the American students he would have encountered if compared to those who received a pre-World War II education at a German university.

RF: Yep.

SG: Didn't have the classical learning. They didn't have the understanding of the tradition, didn't have any knowledge of the tradition.

RF: Yep.

SG: Nonetheless, do you think Strauss saw certain virtues or strengths in his American students that perhaps would not have been available if he had a classroom full of European students?

RF: Well, my dear, Steve, I wish I could quote any kind of chapter and verse. I can't.

SG: Sure, sure. I understand.

RF: This was another instance of the lack of comparisons of this kind. One thing is clear: he admired, liked—in some cases, really liked his American students for what they were. I mean, Walter Berns, and Allan,[23] and the others. But I never, never recall a kind of regret. I mean the American students had a certain freshness; they were ignorant but fresh and independent. Guys like Marty and Herb[24]—well, Herb Garfinkle doesn't count; he studied mostly with David Easton. But they'd been in the Merchant Marines. They'd been around, you know. They brought something, something fresh and interesting, and he was very attracted to these interesting guys. I'm wandering. I never heard this kind of comparison.

SG: Sure, sure, sure. I understand.

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[23] Allan Bloom: see "People."

[24] Martin Diamond and Herbert Storing.

RF: I remember once telling him that I was going to write something on the shallowness of the modern great curriculum at Oxford which I had taken, which didn't go beyond Descartes or Hobbes and was nothing on the ancients. He looked at me strangely: "I don't bother myself with writing about academia." He didn't say "academia," but about curricula and that sort of thing.

SG: Right. I understand. He had bigger fish to fry.

RF: That's it.

SG: Was his Jewishness significant to his role as a teacher in any way?

RF: Well, that's just a complicated question. Fundamentally, no. I'm not a Jew and I found him a wonderful teacher. I never felt anything like that. On the other hand, he was a Jew, he cared for the Jews, and his entry into very great issues often was through, of course, Jewish texts, Maimonides being the greatest example. On the other hand, he also knew Christian texts. He didn't talk about that much, but he did, but not as many or as extensively—but he did, to my embarrassment, far better than I did. But this was a matter of just his very great learning and investigation. I'll leave it at that because I have nothing, I think, of real subtlety to add to a complicated question. After all, he was a great Jewish scholar. I mean, I benefited enormously from his introduction to *The Guide of the Perplexed*[25] and other such writings.

SG: Did you consider Leo Strauss your friend?

RF: Yes. That's why my answer to the first question you asked would have been: he was friendly. Yeah. I mean, I spoke with him, I could speak with him quite candidly. He liked my wife a lot because she's a kind of independent soul who would tease him and speak to him straight, probably more than I. I once entertained the thought of getting him a little summer place for a few weeks next to where we went. I think he would have liked that.

SG: Good. Looking back now—

RF: Let me add: a very unequal friend. Did I consider him my friend? In a very—knowing that it was in a very subordinate way.

SG: The parallel question is, which I can't expect you to be able to answer, but do you think he considered you his friend?

RF: To some extent, going a little bit beyond the puppyish phase.

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[25] "How to Begin to Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*," in Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (The University of Chicago Press, 1963).

SG: Looking back on Leo Strauss now, how do you think of him? Not how you thought of him back in 1958—looking back over your career, and looking back over what's transpired since he taught, how does he appear to you?

RF: Every time I read his works, any work of his, my judgment, my estimate of him only increases. I see things that I did not see before. He's superior—he's far superior to any, to virtually any thinker I know, maybe except the greats. In beginning from what's obvious or what would one find plausible and then entering deeply into a topic, in showing you the necessity of the argument that he's making from the beginning. If in some ways I'm disappointed in what I've done, I regard that as completely my fault in not living up, in fact, to the kind of remarkable investigations which he encouraged and the single-mindedness which he encouraged.

So I regard myself as my life having been decisively shaped by Strauss. Many people think that. But there's a richness there from which I have not fully drawn. The world is much warmer, more interesting, more sober, by virtue of that education. And he set one to do one's own work, and if one failed to do all what one might, that's one's self, not him.

SG: Somehow your remarks are suggesting to me the thought that Strauss, in addition to inspiring ambition, seemed to inspire a gift for friendship among his students. That there was the rivalry that you spoke of,[26] undeniably, among some students. But there was also a great gift for friendship among various of his students. Now would that have been there had they not had Strauss for a teacher? Did he draw it out? Did he make them self-conscious of it?

RF: He fosters generosity of soul. That is, he encourages above all, let's use Locke's word, understanding, that's pursuit of understanding. And that's something that's shared. That there will be differences over politics, or over ambition, or different points of view, or political conflicts, academic conflicts of one sort or another, that's bound to happen. But there's an encouragement of largeness of soul, because one is about important things and one appreciates others who are about important things, then, because one can learn from them. I'm sure I'm missing something. All right, I'm not the most ambitious sort and so—pride and such maybe mean less to me, for better and for worse. So I don't say I understand all of this, but that's surely what was encouraged.

He used to say that one of the few things that can be unequivocally shared is, in fact, thoughts. And I regard one of the happy things of my life has been these wonderful colleagues I've especially had at Boston College. But I can run into Cliff Orwin[27] or Chris Nadon[28] or people all

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[26] In an earlier conversation.

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

[28] Christopher Nadon is associate professor of Government at Claremont McKenna College. He is the author of *Xenophon's Prince: Republic and Empire in Xenophon's* Cyropaideia (University of California Press, 2001).

over the country and they're interested if they think you're going to have something interesting to say. Or they are sympathetic to, at least, your endeavors. And I think that comes in part from this. It's very different.

I mean, for a couple of my books, I've had reviews by English historians. They are so concerned that no one enter their turf without their permission and their point of view. And to some extent Strauss's students at their best are non-sectarian. If there's a good argument, they say so, or they know they ought to say so, that they ought to rise above their dispositions or their friendships. Otherwise they're living by prejudice, which is a mistake.

SG: To put words in your mouth, you're saying that Straussianism is a sect devoted to non-sectarianism?

RF: Yes. It has the human frailties of a sect. There's not a single Straussian who's comparable to Strauss in the breadth of his views and such. Therefore to some extent we're followers. The best of the followers of Strauss are looking at the premises, including the premises that Strauss unearthed or thought were sound.

SG. I understand. Thank you very much.

RF: It's a pleasure.