

George Winston Bush?

Invocations of Munich and a parade of new Hitlers won't be enough to convince Americans that this is a good war.

By Leon Hadar

SIR—Please do not ever mention George Bush. And Winston Churchill in the same sentence again, even if you must break all the rules of grammar to do so. Steve Pettit, California (Letter to the editor, The Economist, May 25, 2006)

BASIL FAWLTY is not a political consultant, nor does he play one on television. But I wish George W. Bush and his loyal band would follow the advice dispensed by Basil, the owner of the Fawlty Towers hotel, during episode six of one of the best-known British television comedies of all time. “Don’t mention the war!” Basil, the irascible Torquay hotel owner played by John Cleese, warns his crew after learning that a group of German tourists are staying there.

Unfortunately, after receiving a knock to the head rendering him even less sensitive than before, Basil cannot stop mentioning the war at every opportunity, upsetting the German guests more and more. In one memorable scene he is goose-stepping around the dining room and rapidly descending into a fit of xenophobic ranting about everything and everyone that most Germans would rather forget. When an angry German asks Basil to stop going on about the war, he reminds him that they started it. “We did not start it,” protests the German. “Yes you did, you invaded Poland,” replies Basil.

Like Basil who can’t stop mentioning the war, the Bushies haven’t been able to stop exploiting the same war and its

“lessons” since the World Trade Center collapsed. In fact, during one of his many press conferences held just one day after the attack, New York City mayor and Bush ally Rudolph Giuliani told the crowd that he had been reading historian John Lukacs’s book *Five Days in London*, which delves into Winston Churchill’s decisions during what the author considers a critical moment in the history of World War II.

At first it sounded to me like Mayor Giuliani, inspired by how Churchill and the people of London reacted during the war, was trying to lift the morale his fellow New Yorkers. Nothing wrong with that. But then the cynic in me was reminded that Giuliani was considering running for the White House and his heroic Churchill-like pose would clearly be more stirring in a campaign television commercial than comparing himself to this or that Lord Mayor of London responding to the devastation of his city by an IRA terrorist bomb.

But then I didn’t know Winnie. Winnie wasn’t a good friend of mine. Perhaps there was something very Churchillian in Hizzonor?

John Lukacs, whose book Giuliani was reading around 9/11—the mayor actually carried the book with him, at least when television cameras were around—knows quite a lot about Churchill and in an interview with *Newsweek*, ten days after the 9/11 attack, made it clear that no, Mr. Mayor, you’re not Churchill, Osama bin Laden is not Adolf Hitler, and the war on terrorism is

not World War II. “I’m very pleased that Mayor Giuliani held up my book. That was very pleasant,” Lukacs, an old-world-style gentleman, told *Newsweek*. “But I don’t think there are any parallels. This crisis we now face, no matter what the president says, is not a war. It’s not the first war of the 21st century. A war is something between nations or states or sometimes even tribes. Who are we going to declare war on?” Declaring “war on terrorism” was “just rhetoric,” Lukacs explained. “But aren’t there parallels between what Churchill was facing as a leader and what George W. Bush was now facing?” the magazine interviewer insisted. And how about the way George W. Bush was carrying himself? Doesn’t he have the stature of a Churchill? Bush and Churchill “are very different personalities,” the Hungarian-born historian, who lived in Europe during World War II, patiently noted. “And this is really not the time to criticize a president, but neither his capacity nor his character is comparable. And character is what counts. Intellect without character is not worth anything.” Ouch.

Sounding a cautionary note, Lukacs went on to tell *Newsweek* that Bush and his aides “should use more sober language instead of talking about crusades. The trouble with people who use this kind of rhetoric is that they don’t even know that it’s rhetoric.”

But since 9/11, through the hunt for Osama bin Laden (“Wanted: Dead or Alive!”), the search for Iraq’s WMD (“mushroom cloud”), the anticipation of

the welcoming of the American “liberators,” and the counterinsurgency in Iraq (“Bring ‘em on”), much of what the Bushies and their neoconservative cheerleaders have been pursuing has given rhetoric a bad name, including the celebration of the many “tipping points” in post-Saddam Mesopotamia, the efforts to help Iraqis “build a democracy,” and the alleged success in “making progress in the march of freedom” in the Greater Middle East and entire universe. As Churchill expert Lukacs pointed out, the kind of empty rhetoric that disguises a disastrous policy, that involves speaking “grandiloquently” and talking “in general terms,” is certainly not a Churchillian trait.

But in the neocon fantasyland that has substituted for real foreign policy since 9/11, why shouldn’t the White House spinners try to liken Bush to Churchill, confident that a submissive press corps would embrace the perverted but powerful historical analogy? After all, Bush once admitted to TV host Oprah Winfrey, “I love Churchill.”

And here was Bush seeking “regime change” in Iraq, despite criticism that he should give negotiations with Saddam Hussein another try. Wasn’t he emulating Churchill, who was also derided in the 1930s for opposing the appeasement of Hitler? Or in the words of Rumsfeld, the primo WWII-buff in the Bush administration: “It wasn’t until each country got attacked that they said: ‘Maybe Winston Churchill was right.’” Here was the Pentagon chief drawing a parallel between Churchill and Bush, the same Bush who had been warned that the U.S. was under threat from al-Qaeda by both the departing Clinton administration and his own security briefings and yet failed to act, which seems to be a very un-Churchillian characteristic. Sure, but as Rumsfeld knows, a robust historical analogy, not unlike potent intelligence findings, shouldn’t be damaged by facts.

“And so, before you knew it, the seeming bozo was our savior,” as Mark Crispin Miller of New York University described Bush’s evolution from an inconsequential and inarticulate Texas governor with no knowledge or experience in foreign policy and national security into a brilliant and towering Churchill. “And he will not waver!” Andrew Card, former White House chief of staff, said at the end of an interview on CNN in October 2001.

“We Will Not Fail,” echoed a *Time* cover story published at the same time, which compared Bush to the British war leader. “[O]ne big thing Bush and Churchill may share,” Michael Elliot gushed in his *Time* profile, “At the times when he was most challenged, and whether he was justified in his sense of self or not (and often he was not), Churchill never knew self-doubt. It seems to rarely stalk Bush. For a man leading the kit-bag-packing troops and a great wide world into a war the like of which it has never known before, that confidence is a useful attribute to have.”

As he attempted to grade Bush’s war oratory, Chris Matthews suggested “When he said ‘Let’s roll’ at the end, I think there is a bit of Churchill in that, in the sense that he was saying, ‘This is not the beginning of the end, it is perhaps the end of the beginning.’”

Well, it was certainly the beginning of a misinformation campaign that would have put Willi Münzenberg into shame. After all, Münzenberg marketed successfully the Soviet Union and Stalin to Western fellow travelers most of whom had never visited the proletariat paradise or met the Soviet dictator. Pundits like Matthews and Elliott live in Washington and schmooze with Bush and his aides on a regular basis.

Yet Bush suddenly turned into Churchill. Osama, Saddam, and any other leader that Bush didn’t like was exposed as a Hitler. And the war on terrorism,

intertwined with the war in Iraq (and Iran?), became World War III against the “Islamofascists.” Indeed, just recently Rumsfeld compared Iraq War critics to the appeasers of Nazism in Europe in the mid-1930s: “It was a time when a certain amount of cynicism and moral confusion set in among Western democracies” and “When those who warned about a coming crisis, the rise of fascism and Nazism, they were ridiculed or ignored,” Rumsfeld told the convention of the American Legion in Salt Lake City. “Indeed, in the decades before World War II, a great many argued that the fascist threat was exaggerated or that it was someone else’s problem” and “Some nations tried to negotiate a separate peace, even as the enemy made its deadly ambitions crystal clear,” Rumsfeld recalled. “It was, Winston Churchill observed, a bit like feeding a crocodile, hoping it would eat you last.” The defense secretary then explained to the audience, which included some WWII veterans, that he was recounting “that history” because “once again we face similar challenges in efforts to confront the rising threat of a new type of fascism.” Today another enemy “has made clear its intentions. ... But some seem not to have learned history’s lessons,” Rumsfeld complained.

And there are some who seem not to have learned the facts of history. They include Rumsfeld, who with his colleague Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, shocked many historians when they compared the anti-American insurgency in Iraq to what they alleged were Nazi guerrillas fighting U.S. troops in occupied Germany. “There is an understandable tendency to look back on America’s experience in postwar Germany and see only the successes,” Rice told the Veterans of Foreign Wars in San Antonio, Texas, in August 2003. “But as some of you here today surely remember, the road we traveled was very difficult. 1945 through 1947 was an especially challenging period. Germany was not immediately

stable or prosperous. SS officers—called ‘werewolves’—engaged in sabotage and attacked both coalition forces and those locals cooperating with them—much like today’s Baathist and Fedayeen remnants.” Speaking to the same group on the same day, Rumsfeld noted the following “facts”:

One group of those dead-enders was known as ‘werewolves.’ They and other Nazi regime remnants targeted Allied soldiers, and they targeted Germans who cooperated with the Allied forces. Mayors were assassinated including the American-appointed mayor of Aachen, the first major German city to be liberated. Children as young as 10 were used as snipers, radio broadcasts, and leaflets warned Germans not to collaborate with the Allies. They plotted sabotage of factories, power plants, rail lines. They blew up police stations and government buildings, and they destroyed stocks of art and antiques that were stored by the Berlin Museum. Does this sound familiar?

If it doesn’t, don’t worry. You’re not experiencing the first signs of senility. As Daniel Benjamin, a leading terrorism expert, commented, “The Rice-Rumsfeld depiction of the Allied occupation of Germany is a farrago of fiction and a few meager facts. ... Werewolf tales have been a favorite of schlock novels, but the reality bore no resemblance to Iraq today.” In reality, Benjamin wrote, werewolf activity amounted to next to nothing—the mayor of Aachen was assassinated before the Nazi surrender. Indeed, as Benjamin pointed out, the organization merited but two passing mentions in the U.S. Army’s official history, “which dwells far more on how docile the Germans were once the Americans rolled in—and fraternization between former enemies was a bigger

problem for the military than confrontation.” Moreover, “there was certainly no major campaign of sabotage and no destruction of water mains or energy plants worth noting,” either. “So, how did this fanciful version of the American experience in postwar Germany get into the remarks of a Princeton graduate and former trustee of Stanford’s Hoover Institute (Rumsfeld) and the former provost of Stanford and co-author of an acclaimed book on German unification (Rice)?” asked Benjamin.

I suppose that these two Bush cabinet officials could blame their speechwriters in the same way that they shifted the responsibility for the fake WMD intelligence onto the CIA. But like the rest of the members of the Bush administration, they are continuing to bombard the American public with World War II analogies and “lessons” as part of the campaign to market the disastrous policies in the Middle East—which will not stop historians from agreeing that the comparison between the role of Bush in combating terrorism with that of Churchill combating Nazi Germany is absurd.

Germany under Hitler had one of the largest and most advanced militaries in the world—to which one could add the military force of Imperial Japan—which by the end of the Second World War was able to bombard London with long-range missiles. Germany was then a great global power with an economic and technological base superior to that of most of its competitors, including Britain. Moreover, “Churchill’s enemy was a powerful, determined dictator; President Bush’s conflict is with a shadowy nemesis and his small band of idolaters,” as one reader argued in a letter to the editor in the London *Times*. Another wrote, “The tragedy of 9/11 was the result of a ‘sucker punch’ landed by a weak enemy on the world’s superpower. A parallel might be the IRA’s Brighton bombing, which almost destroyed a

British Government.” Hence, “compare, if you must, Bush’s reaction to 9/11 to Thatcher’s reaction to the Brighton bomb. It is not by any stroke of imagination comparable to Churchill’s defiance of Nazi Germany.”

Nor does the term “War on Islamofascism” make much historical sense in the context of the war of terrorism and U.S. policy in the Middle East. First, the term seems to jumble together secular nationalist regimes and movements, like the Ba’ath in Iraq and Syria, with religious fundamentalist governments and groups—the radical anti-American (Sunni) al-Qaeda and the Lebanese-based (Shi’ite) Hezbollah; the fundamentalist Sunni Wahabbi movement that is headquartered in pro-American Saudi Arabia and the Shi’ite clerics that rule in Tehran; the anti-Western Muslim Brotherhood movement (including Hamas in Palestine) and the Shi’ite clerics in power in (pro-American?) Baghdad. The Islamofascism label seems to be applied to movements and governments that have nothing in common with each other—much less European fascism.

Unlike al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, or Hezbollah, the fascist movements in Europe in the 1930s were rooted in modern and secular Western ideologies, and their economic nationalist agendas had won many followers in the democratic nations, including the U.S., then beset by the Great Depression. While fascism had strong atavistic roots, not all the political parties associated with it were anti-Semitic. Italy’s Fascist intellectual and political leadership included quite a few Jews, and Mussolini didn’t adopt anti-Jewish policies until he decided to form a military alliance with Hitler when he was under pressure from the Nazi leader. Moreover, Western leaders, including Churchill, regarded Mussolini for a long time as a potential ally against Nazi Germany. Here is what Churchill said about *Il Duce* in 1938: “It

would be a dangerous folly for the British people to underrate the enduring position in world history which Mussolini will hold; or the amazing qualities of courage, comprehension, self-control, and perseverance which he exemplifies.”

In fact, Churchill and his other World War II allies maintained close links to the pro-Fascist regimes in Spain and Portugal and succeeded in persuading them not to enter the war on the side of Hitler. (Spain and Portugal also helped save thousands of European Jewish refugees fleeing the advancing German armies; the two governments also joined the pro-American NATO alliance after the war.) Americans may also forget that the pro-Hitler collaborationist Vichy regime was acknowledged as the official government of France by the United States and other countries, including Canada, even when they were at war with Germany. And can anyone imagine a contemporary Western musician idolizing our latest “Islamofascist” enemy, Iran’s President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the way Cole Porter lyrics, adapted by P.G. Wodehouse for the 1935 London production of “Anything Goes,” did: “You’re the top! You’re the Great Houdini! You’re the top! You are Mussolini!”

But then we shouldn’t forget that Saddam Hussein, the ex-president of Iraq and the leader of its Ba’ath Party—whose political platform mishmashes Arab nationalist, Communist, and Fascist ideological orientations—was for most of the 1980s a strategic ally of the United States in the Middle East. Hence Ronald Reagan ended up providing the man who would become Hitler with economic and military assistance to help him fight Iran’s mullahs and in the process encouraged Saddam to launch what would become the bloodiest war in the modern history of the Middle East. And guess who was dispatched then by Washington to make those deals with Saddam? A hint: it’s a current U.S.

defense secretary who has been comparing critics to those who appeased Hitler.

If the Bushies insist on continuing to mention the war, we can urge them to imagine the following scenario that includes all the historical analogies that neoconservative ideologues like to apply—World War II, Hitler, appeasement. As American and Allied forces invade Nazi Germany in 1945, Adolf Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, and several SS troops flee to Fascist Spain, where they hide in the Pyrenees Mountains and mount guerrilla attacks against the free French government. The American response? To ask Generalissimo Francisco Franco if he would be kind enough

to send some of his forces to catch those Nazis. Does this sort of alternate history remind you of a certain U.S. administration that allowed Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda associates to flee to Pakistan, where they are now hiding as Washington continues to plead with the military dictator who rules Pakistan to try to capture the evil ones who were actually responsible for the 9/11 terror acts?

Where is your umbrella, George Chamberlain? ■

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Tour de France

We could learn from the country neoconservatives call our oldest enemy.

By R.J. Stove

CONTRARY TO RECEIVED postwar wisdom, Marshal Pétain could be both witty and trenchant. But he undeniably plumbed an abyss of falsehood when, in a 1941 broadcast, he announced: “Frenchmen, you have short memories.” Calling the French amnesiacs is like calling the Japanese milquetoasts. It would be truer to apply to France Saki’s celebrated epigram about the Balkans: the place produces more history than it can locally consume. Two *Esquire* contributors, Judy Jones and William Wilson, got matters right during the 1980s: “The French can recall the pecking order of the Merovingian dynasty ... as clearly as you can remember your last love affair, and they’re likely to be a good deal more entertaining on the subject.”

Such common sense could well be unprintable in that magazine today, and certainly a veritable public-relations nomenclatura flourishes to persuade us of France’s prominent part in any Axis of Evil. Columbia University’s Robert Paxton made mischievous fun in these pages of one such attempt at persuasion: John J. Miller and Mark Molesky’s *Our Oldest Enemy*. Yet the agitprop keeps coming, with an already crowded field having been further enriched in 2005 by Richard Chesnoff’s *The Arrogance of the French* (“this book will open your eyes!” trilled polymath Sean Hannity) and Denis Boyles’s *Vile France: Fear, Duplicity, Cowardice, and Cheese*. (Chances of a book called *Vile Israel, Vile Ireland, or Vile Saudi*