

Court Historian

Andrew Roberts, the Anglosphere's greatest modern mythologist, may be perfectly suited to sanitize the Bush presidency.

By R.J. Stove

CONNOISSEURS OF HOMICIDAL book reviews have long treasured the virtuosic evisceration that British immunologist Sir Peter Medawar performed in 1950 on Teilhard de Chardin, that once fashionable Gallic mountebank. Of Teilhard's *The Phenomenon of Man*, Medawar remarked, "its author can be excused of dishonesty only on the grounds that before deceiving others he has taken great pains to deceive himself."

Sir Peter's slashing verdict inevitably comes to a mind confronted with the work of currently hip British neocon Andrew Roberts. The historian has an influential admirer in George W. Bush, who after meeting Roberts in a London restaurant invited him to a second date in the White House. "To prove how serious he was," *Vanity Fair's* Vicky Ward reported, "Bush wrote down his personal phone number." Roberts's website boasts that at their later meeting, "he and his wife spent 40 minutes alone with President Bush in the Oval Office." Rumors of a presidential biography—or ghosted autobiography—soon took flight.

Roberts's newfound vogue rests almost entirely upon *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900*. Whether this 754-page blockbuster is the most mendacious tract marketed as non-fiction within the last decade, or whether Roberts genuinely believes the tripe he spouts therein, is among our era's more conspicuous literary puzzles. Nonetheless, this apparent dichotomy proves to be a distinction without a difference.

Looking for candor in Roberts's agitprop is as absurd as seeking it in presentations from Madison Avenue. That is precisely what Roberts has become: not a historian at all but an advertising agent, whose account happens to be the Anglosphere and whose moralizing is as stridently simpleminded as Brecht's.

To expect in Roberts's effusions the smallest nuance or humility makes hunting for four-leaf clovers seem like an intelligent use of one's time. He is incorrigible. Not only must every good deed of British or American rule be lauded till the skies resound with it, but so must every deed that is morally ambiguous or downright repellent.

The Amritsar carnage of 1919, where British forces under Gen. Reginald Dyer slew 379 unarmed Indians? Absolutely justified, according to Roberts, who curiously deduces that but for Dyer, "many more than 379 people would have lost their lives." Hitting prostrate Germany with the Treaty of Versailles? Totally warranted: the only good Kraut is a dead Kraut. Herding Boer women and children into concentration camps, where 35,000 of them perished? Way to go: the only good Boer is a dead Boer. Interning Belfast Catholics, without anything so vulgar as a trial, for no other reason than that they were Belfast Catholics? Yep, the only good bog-trotter ... well, finish the sentence yourself.

FDR's obeisance to Stalin? All the better to defeat America First "fascists." (Roberts has "fascists" on the brain,

having spent pages feverishly denouncing the prewar Teutonophile naïveté of long forgotten British historian Sir Arthur Bryant, while administering to tenured Leninist head-kickers Christopher Hill and Eric Hobsbawm polite slaps on the wrist.) FDR the compulsive lecher? Actively commendable: Roberts hopes "the great man did indeed find some happiness with his lissome secretary." Bombing Germany and Japan into glue? Bring it on. Sinking the General Belgrano during the Falklands crisis? Cool. NATO massacring Serbs? Megacool. Almost everything in modern politics that even (or especially) Britain's and America's authentic well-wishers consider a cause of shame, Roberts regards as a crowning splendor.

Curiously, he fails to carry this attitude to its logical conclusion by applauding Harold Macmillan's public-spirited labors in 1945 to give anticommunist refugees firsthand experience of Uncle Joe's compassion; or by demanding that Lieutenant Calley's philanthropic My Lai endeavors be rewarded with a Nobel Peace Prize; or by cheering the 1969 British blockades that released a million skeletal Biafrans from the perils of obesity; or by praising *Roe v. Wade* for having rescued 48 million Americans since 1973 from the terrifying trauma of being born. No doubt a second edition will rectify these gaps.

It is tempting to make an entire article not only from Roberts's forensic amorality but from his outright factual inepti-

tude. In a spasm of revisionist daydreaming, Roberts has announced that the Australian prime minister in 1938 was Robert Menzies. This would have astonished the actual Australian prime minister of that year, who bore the name Joseph Lyons. Presumably relying on one-volume encyclopedias' entries, Roberts never got around to discovering that the Australian leader baptized Joseph Benedict Chifley was known to all his compatriots as Ben Chifley: not, *pace* Roberts, as "Joseph Chifley." Someone might also with benefit have advised Roberts that the Brighton bombing aimed at Margaret Thatcher occurred in 1984, not 1985, and that Nelson Mandela was released from jail in 1990, not 1994. Virginia Woolf could hardly have contributed to the periodical *Encounter*, since she suicided 12 years before it began.

It is equally tempting to expatiate upon Roberts's paroxysmal hissy-fits. Dutch professor Pieter Geyl once wrote a characteristically civilized book bearing the characteristically civilized title *Debates With Historians*. Roberts, if he ever attempted such a book, would need to call it *Screaming Matches Against Historians* or *Chewing Historians' Carpet*.

No such feistiness marks Roberts's behavior toward those equipped with political and military muscle, or their behavior in return. Positively prodigious is the fawning he inspires in Anglophone overlords. They include John Howard, who spent his government's final summer vacation reading *The English-Speaking Peoples* and whose usual approach to high culture evokes that renowned witticism about the "artistic" JFK: "the only piece of music he recognizes is 'Hail to the Chief.'" Having witnessed the undignified reverence for Roberts shown by George W. Bush, Roberts's wife assured London's *Observer*: "I thought I had a crush on him, but it's nothing like the crush President Bush has on him."

Still harder to credit is Roberts's own power-mania, which would defy the most hostile caricaturist. When *The New Republic*, in its April 13, 2007 issue printed an attack on Roberts by journalist Johann Hari, Roberts roared that if such comments had appeared in Britain, "I would sue [Hari] for libel and doubtless take tens of thousands of pounds off him." On July 27, 2008 another London broadsheet, *The Times*, cited Roberts as demanding of Gordon Brown's government a taxpayer-funded regulatory organization to be called Ofhist. The *Times* continued, without the faintest suggestion of irony: "Its task would be to protect what he [Roberts] designates 'proper historians' from incursions by 'amateurs' into writing history books, and to restrain literary editors from commissioning 'C-list celebs' and the writers of 'chick lit' to review such historians' work." No, this is not a joke. When Roberts says he wants to sic the nanny state onto writers whom he dislikes, he means it.

ROBERTS—BASKING AS HE NOW IS IN THE HIGH SUNSHINE OF NEOCON APPROVAL—HAS SLOUGHED THE HABITS OF BORING OLD HISTORIOGRAPHY.

In fairness to the earlier Roberts—and, to quote Dorothy Parker on Il Duce, "I would strip a gear any time in an effort to be square toward that boy"—two of his previous publications, his biographies of Lord Salisbury and of Neville Chamberlain's Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax, suggested a certain fundamental engagement with political society, at least with its British aristocratic division. (This aristocratic interest doubtless derived in part from the fact that Roberts has a Kentucky Fried Chicken salesman for a father, almost as glamorous a lineage as having Typhoid Mary for a mother.) But those books' better moments are completely unable to expunge from one's mouth the taste that *The English-Speaking Peoples*

leaves. By what we must infer to be a conscious decision, Roberts—basking as he now is in the high sunshine of neocon approval—has sloughed the habits of boring old historiography the way a snake sloughs its winter skin.

Words cannot convey exactly how frightening a man becomes when he turns from historian to propagandist. The genuine historian must be skeptical by his calling's very nature. Even if he quails at, in Dr. Johnson's immortal phrase, "survey[ing] mankind from China to Peru," he must still survey enough of mankind to realize the sole universally obeyed moral law: there are no universally obeyed moral laws. History is crammed with intelligent people's stupid acts and with stupid people's intelligent acts. With meek liberals who are loathed and with swaggering despots who are loved. With pious Muslims who drink and with pious Byzantines who slaughter. With economic theories that make Country A flourish and make Country B starve.

With humanitarians effecting mass murder and with sleazebags preventing it. Accordingly, categorical imperatives about how *Homo sapiens* should act contradict every day of the historian's experience, and—whatever his own religious beliefs—are best relegated by him to his children's Sunday-school lessons.

Thus, when Bush babbles about how regime change will ensure "an end to tyranny," alarm bells ring inside the historian's head. An end to what sort of tyranny? For how long? Is there not the tyranny of the ballot box and the soundbite as well as the jackboot? Can democracy be exported at all? If so, how, when, and by whom? Can methods workable in America's absence suffice in Amer-

ica's presence? And so forth. Alas, such healthy historiographical doubt seems nowhere to affect policy outcomes, which, to make them more insulting, are generally couched in Blair-style fatuities like "History teaches us ..." (The only thing history taught Blair is that it is always 1938, always Chamberlain at Munich, forever and ever amen.)

Simply to list the historian's attributes is to appreciate afresh how totally the Roberts of 2008 lacks them. Like—although with less excuse than—the hardened "Full Metal Jacket" Marine who muses, "inside every gook there's an American trying to get out," Roberts has no discernible understanding of what it is to be beyond, still less to be gladly beyond, the American empire. It is a truth that, within this empire, we never seem to learn: the world's population does not consist of 6,718,007,462 people busting a gut to be American.

THE ROBERTS-STYLE REVOLUTIONIST ADVOCATES DEMOCRATISM, SEXUAL LIBERATION, AND ENDLESS WAR AGAINST "ISLAMOFASCISM."

Roberts's infatuation with the Anglosphere compels him to assume, instead of proving, that the Anglosphere actually exists. But does it, outside neocon fantasies? Did it have any meaning before the Thatcher-Reagan personal friendship or the FDR-Churchill political marriage of convenience? What grounds, historically, are there for concluding that a shared tongue unites peoples? Bernard Shaw's celebrated "divided by a common language" quip suggests the contrary. So, too, for that matter, does the Serbo-Croat experience. Could it not be conjectured that America has owed its entire essence since at least 1776 to the fact of Not Being Britain? But for its Not-Britain-ness, would America even be America? How many American leaders before Reagan actually imagined that an "Anglosphere"

determined their policies, as opposed to being intermittent rhetoric? How many British leaders? (One such leader, Lord Palmerston, famously said the opposite: "we have no permanent allies, only permanent interests." For similar convictions across the pond, consult the Monroe Doctrine and Washington's Farewell Address.) What meliorating effect, pray tell, did this "Anglosphere" have upon Eisenhower's clobbering of Anthony Eden in the Suez affair? Or upon Harold Wilson's refusal to permit British troops in Vietnam? Or—if bilingual Canada is considered an Anglosphere component—upon Pierre Trudeau's "A plague on both your houses" stance toward both America and Britain? What price have Irish-Americans ever put on the Anglosphere's desirability? How much did pro-British sentiment in Australia and, particularly New Zealand, matter against Britain's 1970s support for the European Common

Market (support that Roberts strangely likens to the actions of "an abusive parent")? Nobody expects any historian to have all the answers. Trouble is, Roberts's cocksureness prevents him from even asking the questions.

Yet there is worse. Roberts commits the same sin for which Orwell rightly castigated Britain's wartime Stalinists. They did not, he complained, ask themselves: "Is this policy right or wrong?" Rather, they asked, "This is Russian policy: how can we make it appear right?" As has already been explained, no British or American crime fails to elicit from Roberts a frenzied justification. Suppose Britain had run its own Auschwitz. Suppose America had carried out its own premeditated Holodomor—as distinct from imperial Britain allow-

ing Irish and Indian famines through gross incompetence. Can we imagine that Roberts would not be there, spin-doctoring apparatus at the ready, to defend such corpse factories? Indeed, on what logical grounds could he oppose them? We know that atomic warfare as practiced at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to say nothing of Dresden's incineration, meets his full approval: "Fortunately," he smugly asserts, "the English-speaking peoples' wars are fought by professional soldiers under the direction of elected politicians, with intellectuals having very little to do with them until they are safely won, after which they can criticize with hindsight and moral superiority." Pius XII, Admiral William Leahy, Bishop Fulton Sheen, and British philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe might have disagreed with Roberts on this last point, but what did they know?

"Live not by lies," Solzhenitsyn pleaded. Lenin had an approach far more congenial than Solzhenitsyn's to the likes of Roberts: "Truth," he explained, "is what serves the revolution." So it is with Roberts's notions of truth: they serve the neocon revolution. The old-style revolutionist advocated cloth caps, gulags, a command economy, and the dictatorship of the proletariat. The Roberts-style revolutionist advocates democratism, sexual liberation, endless war against "Islamofascism," a Ponzi-scheme economy, and the dictatorship of the Anglo. There is no reason for the second apparatchik, any more than the first, to impose on the intellects of the rest of us. Orwell again:

Do remember that dishonesty and cowardice always have to be paid for. Don't imagine that for years on end you can make yourself the boot-licking propagandist of ... any ... regime, and then suddenly return to mental decency. Once a whore, always a whore. ■

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The Candidates' Vices

GIVEN THAT ONLY TWO sitting senators have gone straight to the White House, and both died within three years of taking office, the choice of running mates in this election was unusually important. The results revealed Senator Obama to be as cool and cerebral as Senator McCain is impetuous and visceral and expressed the candidates' flaws as much as their leadership styles. In choosing an establishment figure in Joe Biden, Obama bowed to conventional wisdom and Beltway expectations. McCain, by contrast, stayed true to his habit of impulsive decisions in selecting Sarah Palin, opting at the last minute against Joe Lieberman, his reported favorite.

Contrary to the common portrayal of Palin as the "maverick" pick, the decision is no measure of McCain's break with the Bush administration or the party's corrupt elements. McCain's choice, besides being a concession to political necessity and a sop to disaffected conservatives, has all the marks of Mr. Bush's flawed decision-making: poorly informed, driven by gut reactions, and heedless of consequences. Substantively, McCain and Palin have not repudiated the Bush record. The 2008 ticket resembles nothing so much as another Bush/Cheney ticket in reverse order.

McCain's pick was transparently aimed at shoring up conservatives and poaching disgruntled Clinton voters yet was presented as proof of his reform credentials. But like McCain's own dubious reforms, which include trampling on the First Amendment and pushing for effective immigration amnesty, Palin's record does not bear much scrutiny. Between her support for windfall-profits taxes and acceptance of earmark spending, she is an odd choice to crusade against tax hikes and federal pork.

What is most striking about the Palin selection is the electoral strategy that it represents. Despite having already solidified Republicans behind himself much more than Obama has done with his partisans, McCain was suffering from an enthusiasm gap, which he has now done much to close. Even so, as fewer voters identified themselves as Republicans this year, there was little incentive to generate greater excitement among a dwindling base and more reason to pursue those alienated by the Bush administration. Choosing Palin would have made more sense in previous elections when the GOP's reputation was still reasonably intact, but today it seems an invitation to electoral disaster.

The selections of Biden and Palin show how much the major parties have switched roles in this election. The Democrats have fielded a ticket designed to make a coherent foreign-policy and national-security argument, and they have done so without the flag-waving metooism of Kerry. For their part, the Republicans, a party now defined by its foreign-policy blunder in Iraq, have opted to run almost obsessively on domestic oil drilling and selected their vice-presidential nominee accordingly.

Obama, consistent with his aversion to confronting established interests, selected Biden to acknowledge his lack of credentials in foreign policy and demonstrate his fealty to the Washington consensus on America's role in the world. While McCain may have used more bellicose rhetoric over the war in Georgia, both Biden and Obama have made clear that their views on NATO expansion and relations with Russia are similar to McCain's, and it was Biden's visit to Tbilisi as Foreign Relations Committee chair that clinched the spot for

him. As a supporter of the wars against Yugoslavia and Iraq, Biden represents the antithesis of what many antiwar progressives thought they were going to find in an Obama administration.

Offshore drilling has become virtually the only winning economic issue for Republicans. Party regulars descended into self-parody during the convention when they took up a modified version of a Black Panther slogan, "Drill, baby, drill." It is fitting, then, that the VP nominee is governor of our largest petrostate and that her main, perhaps only, area of policy expertise is energy. No doubt the national GOP hopes to use Palin and drilling to ride popular discontent with high gas prices to victory. This would help account for the paucity of other economic policy ideas on offer in St. Paul. Regardless, it is a political strategy based on the chimera of energy independence and demagoguery against foreign oil producers to advance a meddlesome foreign-policy agenda.

It was difficult to watch the Republican convention and not have a feeling of *déjà vu* over Palin's rapturous reception. Just as George W. Bush was acclaimed as "one of us" by many conservatives who had been scared into his arms by John McCain in the 2000 primaries, Palin has received the same enthusiastic endorsement on a symbolic, identity-driven basis, despite being chosen by the same man the Right once found so repugnant. After eight years of seeing the last "reformer with results" in action, most conservatives appear to have learned nothing about how the GOP manipulates them and wins their votes. If McCain prevails, they will get more of the same policies that have brought Republicans to their current predicament. ■