

IS THERE LIFE AFTER BITBURG?

It is not true that the Jewish defense agencies connived with President Reagan to arrange the Bitburg schedule in order to revitalize the world's memory of the Holocaust.

Someone suggested that connivance because, on the surface, it has seemed to work out that way.

Not since World War II have so many groups invoked the crimes of the Nazis: veterans' groups, Christian groups, public officials without end. Elie Wiesel's magnificent statement would never have been featured on so many front pages. Indeed, our local Yom Hashoa observances, at Temple Emanu-El and at the Holocaust Memorial, received more media attention than they have in recent years. The world has remembered, with a bang that will be heard through the corridors of the White House for some time to come.

But if it was not the result of a conspiracy between the President and the Jewish agencies, neither, on the other hand, did the episode take place because President Reagan is pro-Nazi or anti-Jewish or anti-Holocaust-remembrance. In some ways, the episode was even more painful than that.

American Jews have varied opinions about Ronald Reagan, depending on their political stripe. The majority of Jews would vote against him today, as they did in 1984 -- but not because of his behavior on particular Jewish issues. As far as the particular Jewish agenda is concerned, Reagan has probably been at least as responsive as any President in American history. His administration made possible the recent dramatic rescue of Ethiopian Jews. He has supported a larger aid package for Israel. Although, along with many Israelis, he would like Israel to work harder on its economy before getting additional supplementary aid, he otherwise supports that supplement. He has constantly risen to the public defense of Israel. And the President has been a leading champion for the establishment of a national Holocaust commission, memorial and museum.

Since Reagan cannot be accused of malice or ill will towards the Jews, commentators have been striving to identify the nature of his sin in not immediately reacting to the impropriety of laying wreaths at Bitburg. "Insensitivity ... superficiality ... mindless political expediency" are words that have been used. They all apply in this case. There will always be a derisive Bitburg footnote in future histories of Reagan, although his larger historical reputation will depend more on other matters. Even in future Jewish histories, there will be scalding references to Reagan and Bitburg, but his overall role in Jewish affairs will finally be assessed more on other matters.

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The issue for the Jews is not Ronald Reagan. The issue is the effect and consequences of this "insensitive, superficial, mindless" act. The nightmare for the Jews is that the world will forget what happened. The worst nightmare is that the young Jews will forget. In the short range, the Bitburg episode seems reassuring. The Jews in San Francisco, in America, spoke out, screamed out in outrage. But they were not the only ones. Every sector of America expressed outrage. The memory of the Nazis and of the Holocaust was revitalized.

But in the longer range, this episode has a less rosy promise. Whatever the President has done in this final week, to cover it in anti-Nazi rhetoric, or even to cancel it, there was some Presidential language in the early apologetics which will come back to haunt us: "No one remembers any more ... it's time to forget ... they (the S.S.?) were victims, too." This is dangerous anti-history. Reconciliation is fine. But wiping out the past is a temptation that will rob us, in this case, of standards of evil which we need in order to remain civilized. As Santayana said, those who ignore the lessons of history are doomed to relive them.

Whatever else has happened, however the President redeems himself personally, the episode should warn us about the impulse to anti-history, to comfortably wipe out the past. We are put on notice that education about the Holocaust must remain always at the top of our communal agenda.

We have managed to make sure that the curriculum guide for the California schools includes a new emphasis on education about the Holocaust and the Nazis. The San Francisco Holocaust education fund, related to our memorial, is gearing up. Sonoma State University is preparing new Holocaust education resources. This is the kind of activity that must be intensified. That is the main long-range message of the Bitburg episode.