

## The Burden of Bitburg

by Robert McAfee Brown

Mr. Reagan's public relations staff promised the world that his the speech at Bergen-Belsen concentration camp would be "very emotional," and would convince us that the visit to the Bitburg cemetery was appropriate. Emotional the speech was, convincing it was not. Although the president spoke with great eloquence, it was too late for crafted words, written by another hand, to overcome the sequence of insensitive presidential deeds preceding it.

We need to remember the sequence:

1. When the presidential trip to Germany was first under discussion, Mr. Reagan categorically ruled out a visit to the Dachau concentration camp, site of tens of thousands of Jewish murders by SS troops, asserting that it was time to forget the past and think of the future. That decision <sup>put</sup> ~~dismissed~~ <sup>disdain on</sup> forty years of Jewish efforts to keep the memory alive so that it would never happen again, and made hollow the subsequent presidential rhetoric at Bergen-Belsen that we must "never forget." ~~It was~~ The initial <sup>was that we are entitled to</sup> item on his agenda ~~that we must~~ forget.

2. At the urging of Chancellor Kohl, Mr. Reagan agreed to visit a German cemetery at Bitburg to honor the war dead, a deed with reconciling possibilities until it was learned that Bitburg contained the graves of 49 members of the SS, those who created and administered Dachau and the other concentration ~~and death~~ camps. The appropriate response in the face of this information would, of course, have been to cancel the visit, as Elie Wiesel, a survivor of Auschwitz, ~~so~~ eloquently pleaded with the president to do. Mr. Reagan refused to do so, for fear of offending Chancellor Kohl and endangering our NATO ties. The decision, <sup>deeply offended</sup> ~~did~~ <sup>deeply offend</sup> all Jewish survivors and the families of Jewish victims, as well as ~~all others with~~

many other Americans.

<sup>^</sup> ~~moral sensitivities~~. The message Mr. Reagan's decision communicated was: it is appropriate to forget the murdered Jews at Dachau <sup>but to</sup> and honor their SS murderers at Bitburg.

3. Seeking to <sup>justify</sup> ~~justify~~ this ~~act of moral insensitivity~~ insensitivity,

<sup>^</sup> <sup>decision,</sup> Mr. Reagan made things worse by telling the world that the German soldiers were victims of Hitler's policies just as surely as those who had died in the concentration camps. <sup>In doing so, the president</sup> This appalling ~~equation~~ <sup>equation</sup> not only demonstrated ethical insensitivity ~~on the part of the president~~, but <sup>also a</sup> total incomprehension of the tortures, the gasings, and the burnings that were the daily order of life and death in the Dachaus of World War II. It is no wonder that Jews were even more deeply outraged, and that ~~all~~ <sup>no</sup> people <sup>with</sup> ethical sensitivity recoiled from such a judgment.

4. Bowing to ~~the weight of~~ public outcry, Mr. Reagan finally agreed to visit a concentration camp despite his original intention not to do so. Unfortunately the gesture could not be interpreted as a change of heart but only as a public relations concession, coupled as it was with the reiterated insistence that the Bitburg visit would proceed as planned. Honoring the murderers remained on the agenda.

5. The day before the trip Mr. Reagan moved from the defensive to the offensive, in both senses of the latter word, by stating that he had a "moral duty" to go to Bitburg, a conviction that even Secretary of State Shultz echoed. To feel morally compelled to lay a wreath at the resting place of some of the <sup>SS murderers makes</sup> ~~most brutal criminals in all the annals of history makes~~ necessary a new definition of "morality," and ~~no~~ <sup>no</sup> amount of subsequent oratory can undo such a lack of moral discrimination.

6. Finally, the president, instead of taking any responsibility for his series of moral lapses, blamed the press for the outcry.

What are we to make of this ~~almost unbelievable~~ scenario, in which each time Mr. Reagan spoke for himself he indicated lessening sensitivity to the moral issues involved? One wants to give the leader <sup>nation's</sup> ~~of one's nation~~ the benefit of the doubt in a matter of controversy; ~~but~~ in this case one cannot. One looks ~~in vain~~ <sup>one</sup> for any acknowledgement from Mr. Reagan that a mistake had been made; ~~and~~ <sup>one</sup> looks in vain. Only in the "emotional" script, written for the president by a specially summoned speech writer, did a new note begin to emerge. It was too much, too late.

One has a right to be angry, not only for the image the world now has of the insensitivity of our president, but even more for the deep ~~and~~ ~~irremedial~~ pain he has inflicted on Jews over a space of several weeks.

But even more than anger, one feels sadness, sadness that the president had no moral resources to redeem the events until the time for credibility had long since passed. "The burden of Bitburg" is that we must not forget the episodes that led ~~up~~ to it, no matter how much the White House aides encourage us to do so. We need to use <sup>those</sup> ~~the~~ episodes ~~surrounding~~ it to initiate new reflections of our own about the meaning of remembrance, of reconciliation, of new beginnings. But we shall no longer look to the White House for help.