

Lawrence Bush

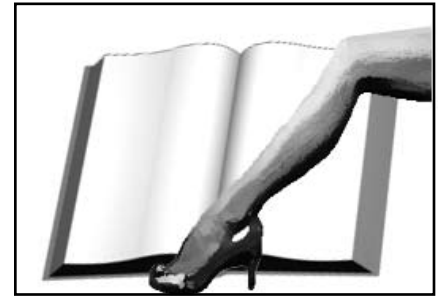
How About We Just Watch Some TV?

Recently, after watching reruns of *The Twilight Zone* for half a Saturday morning, I realized that I knew all of Rod Serling's plots by heart. I decided there and then to cut off my cable service.

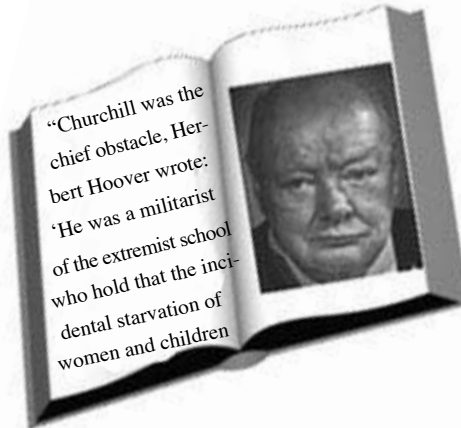


Watching the boob tube was unbecoming for the editor of a high-falutin' journal — besides which, I would save hundreds of dollars and wouldn't have to buy a high-definition set to replace my old monster!

This would be a good time, I figured, to a) start chasing the wife around the table and b) start reading more books. As an editor, I get lots of advance review copies.



The first volume I opened was *Human Smoke*, by Nicholson Baker (Simon & Schuster). He's known for turning brief moments — bottle-feeding a baby, ascending an escalator — into entire novels. *Human Smoke* is no work of fiction, however, but a 400-plus page compilation of short, paraphrased news clippings about the cultivation of hatred, militarism, anti-Semitism and racism between the two world wars. With hardly a word of editorializing, Baker takes aim at our traditional, one-sided condemnation of the Axis powers by portraying Winston Churchill's bloodthirstiness, the ruthlessness of British colonialism, Franklin Roosevelt's boy-in-his bathtub infatuation with naval warships — and the anti-Semitism of the whole rotten lot of 'em.



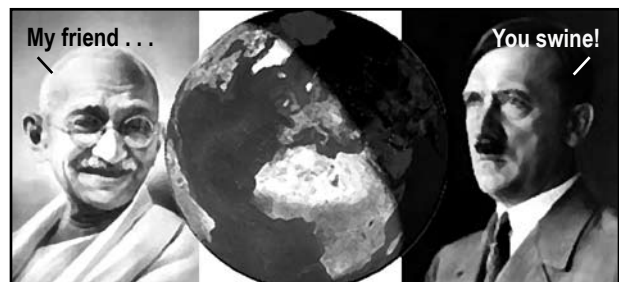
Baker's book really challenged my beliefs about World War II. I hadn't known, for instance, that Great Britain, experienced in the aerial terrorization of colonial populations, had started bombing German civilians well before the London blitz. Nor

did I know that the U.S. and Britain had encircled Japan with military bases in the years prior to Pearl Harbor. Baker has strong pacifist leanings and seems to see WW II more as a replay of WW I — the same kind of aggressive men butting heads and gearing up their war machines, despite their people's desires for peace — than as a defensive struggle of the righteous against world-conquering fascism.

Then again, he barely examines the Spanish Civil War, or the Soviet Union's bogeyman role for both the fascists and the capitalist powers. The book almost feels as if it might have been written by one of Charles Lindbergh's America First crowd — but without the anti-Semitism.

In fact, Baker's sympathies lie solidly with the Jews, who were the only WW II victims who were not also victimizers, as he tells it — and who had no defenders besides a few brave but largely ineffectual pacifists, leftists, and citizens of mercy. Among these, Gandhi stands out as the most credible yet least credible, all at once. His exhortations to non-violent resistance, even in the face of genocide, were so idealistic as to seem insensitive ("I can conceive the necessity," he wrote at the advent of the war, "of the immolation of hundreds, if not thousands, to appease the hunger of dictators.") But at least his politics were rooted in the view that the great majority of human beings have

consciences that can be stirred. "I must refuse to believe that the Germans as a nation have no heart," he wrote in 1939. Compare this to Churchill's quip, when ordering air raids on military rather than civilian targets: "Duty must come before pleasure."



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Human Smoke prompted a memory of my seventh-grade social studies teacher, Miss O'Rourke, who taught us that the difference between a liberal and a conservative is that a liberal believes human beings are basically good and need to be supported, while a conservative believes that human beings are basically bad and need to be restrained. I know that politics are a lot more complicated than the O'Rourke Principle, yet it still helps me place myself within the ideological currents of the day — for in spite of everything, as Anne Frank put it, I “still believe that people are really good at heart.”

But would Anne herself have been saved through non-violent resistance? Improbable — despite Nicholson Baker's repeated intimations of German unhappiness with their Führer's outlandish anti-Semitism and ferocious drive to war. (Baker quotes from the diary of William Shirer, reporting for CBS from Berlin in 1939: “How can a country go into a major war with a population so dead against it?”) But violence didn't do it, either, not for Anne or 1.5 million other Jewish children . . .

Nevertheless, my resolve was firm (and my wife was still a few steps ahead of me), so I pressed on with my reading campaign. A few recent arrivals seemed like appropriate follow-ups to *Human Smoke*, since they focused on the history of Israel . . . whoops, make that “Palestine.” It seems that there's a small publishing boomlet these days of narratives told by the “other side.”

I read, for instance, *Palestine, A Personal History* (Grove Press), by Karl Sabbagh, a British journalist whose father was a popular Palestinian radio announcer for the BBC.

Talk about revisionist history! Sabbagh obliterates all vestiges of the “land with no people for a people with no land” mythology. While his book is basically a richly textured family memoir dating back to 1700, it was written, he says, “to show that the foundation of the State of Israel perpetrated an enormous injustice against the Palestinians. This injustice was achieved by promulgating a series of institutional lies to the rest of the world — a process that continues today.”

He revisits the history of British colonialism in Palestine following the destruction of the Ottoman Empire. (Those British

Ultimately, Baker's book renewed in me a strong respect for the logic and spirituality of pacifism. Beyond that, I didn't quite know what to make of his “a-pox-on-both-your-houses” interpretation of the ‘Good War’ — and not knowing what to think makes me awfully nervous and nostalgic for the good ol' boob tube . . .



bounders! How have they gotten away, nearly blameless, for their international crimes?) He details how the Zionist movement found friends in high places. He describes the 1948 *Nakba*, or Catastrophe, when “Jewish forces deliberately expelled many Palestinian Arabs from their homes.”

And he makes an ill-conceived comparison between the Grand Mufti's collaboration with the Nazis and the “Zionist representatives in Austria [who] sat in Eichmann's office and were treated as honored clients as they haggled over a thousand passports for Jews . . .”

Ah, yes, Adolf Eichmann. Apart from *The Twilight Zone*, his trial in Jerusalem was the most talked-about feature on the boob tube in my elementary school days. In the schoolyard, we'd spend time thinking up ways for him to be punished.

I remember trying to get a handle on the scope of the Nazi crimes by enumerating

the thirty-odd kids in my mostly Jewish fourth-grade class: how 35,000 of each of them would have had to die to come even close to the number of Jewish children Eichmann sent to the gas chambers in three years.

That's 35,000 Elizabeth Silvers (real cute and sparkly), 35,000 Sylvia Wertheimers

(a brain, and so nice), 35,000 Harry Brods (he owned a pony), 35,000 Ivy Dodges (make-out parties at her house), 35,000 Robert Cantors (my best friend), 35,000 of me . . .



Karl Sabbagh doesn't say much about the Holocaust, beyond blaming it for the success of Zionism. He writes considerably more about the racism *of* Jews than about the racism *against* Jews. That didn't entirely blunt the impact his book had on me, however. Any time a writer raises fundamental questions about Israel's actual right to exist, I don't, like many in the Jewish community, feel hot under the collar and ready to cry, "Anti-Semite!" Instead, I feel fretful and guilty.

Why so? Because the truth is that I somewhat identify with the next book that was on my reading list: *If I Am Not For Myself: Journey of an Anti-Zionist Jew* (Verso), by the American-born Mike Marqusee, a London writer and journalist.

Marqusee and I both hail from left-wing, secular Jewish backgrounds, and were habituated to viewing Zionism, in his words, as "an ideology and a political movement . . . open to rational dispute, and on a variety of grounds."

Those grounds, he writes, may include that "the Jewish claim to Palestine [is] irrational, anachronistic, and intrinsically unjust to other inhabitants," or that "the Jewish state [is] discriminatory or racist in theory and in practice," or a rejection of "the idea that Jewish people constitute a 'nation,' or at least . . . a nation-state," or the conclusion, "on the basis of an examination of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians that the underlying cause of the conflict was the ideology of the Israeli state."

Good grief! Not only do I defend Marqusee's right to hold these beliefs without being slandered as a 'self-hating Jew,' but I actually have some sympathy for the last two of his four propositions!

I guess I'm just an old-fashioned kind of Jew. Before the 1940s, remember,



nearly the entire Jewish left, outside the Zionist movement, viewed Zionism as "bourgeois nationalism." Mainstream Reform Jews saw Zionism as violative of their notion of Jewish identity as a prophetic, religious identity.

No one called you 'self-hating' for being opposed to Zionism as an ideology.

Marqusee recites historical facts like these, and interprets them through his ideological lens, with supreme confidence. That's where we crucially differ. While he finds in his anti-Zionism "emancipation both as a Jew and as a human being," I treat my own ambivalence about Zionism as highly suspect. After all, I have been to Israel only once. I did not live through the Holocaust. I am easily swayed by what I read.

I know also that I tend to indulge in a Gandhian way of thinking about Israel's enemies: *Nah, nah, they can't be that fanatical, they can't be that hateful, they can't be that uncaring about their own lives and the lives of their children.*



At the same time, I impose on my own people some highly politicized expectations: that we cultivate *rakhmones* in a world that is ruthless, be peacemakers in a world that loves war, be internationalists in a world riven by ethnic and national hatreds . . .

All of my intellectual waffling aside, I'm so sick of being marginalized within the Jewish community by being less-than rah-rah about Israel! And I'm so nervous about being excommunicated — even by some of the readers of this magazine!

Most of all, perhaps, I'm afraid to admit to having thoughts that aren't anchored in moral uprightness, such as:

So what if the friggin' Palestinians were cast out to make room? There weren't that many of them back then, anyway!

I want the place to be a Jewish state! I have family there! I want to be able to run there if I need to!

The United Nations, the colonial powers, and the Communist bloc all said it was okay!

Can't you just leave us alone, already?

Nu, can we not talk about Israel, please?

How about we just watch some TV? ■

