

# Is U.S. like Germany of the '30s?

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BERLIN -- I can understand, my German friend said, why Germans voted for Hitler in 1933 -- though he did not receive a majority of the vote. The Weimar Republic was weak and incompetent. The Great Depression had ruined the nation's war-devastated economy. People were bitter because they thought their leaders had betrayed them in the war. They wanted revenge for the humiliation of Versailles. Hitler promised strong leadership and a new beginning. But why did they continue to support that group of crazy drug addicts, thugs, killers and madmen?

The historical question remains. I leave aside the question of the guilt of the whole German people (a judgment beyond my competence because I am not God) and ask what explanations might account for what happened. Hitler turned the German economy around in short order. He was crazy, of course, a demagogic mystic sensitive to aspirations of the German spirit. He appealed skillfully to the dark side of the German heritage. Anti-Semitism was strong in Germany, as it was in most European countries, but not violent until Hitler manipulated it. He stirred up the memories of historic German military accomplishments and identified himself with Frederick the Great -- thus placating the Prussian ethos of the German army. He promised glory to a nation still smarting from the disaster of 1918. Germany was emerging from the ashes, strong and triumphant once again. He also took control of the police apparatus. The military might have been able to dump him till 1937. After that he was firmly in power. The path lay open to holocaust.

Can this model be useful to understand how contemporary America is engaged in a criminally unjust war that has turned much of the world against it, a war in which torture and murder have become routine? Has the combination of the World Trade Center attack and a president who believes his instructions come from God unleashed the dark side of the American heritage?

What is this dark side? I would suggest that it is the mix of Calvinist religious righteousness and "my-country-right-or-wrong" patriotism that dominated our treatment of blacks and American Indians for most of the country's history. It revealed itself in the American history of imperialism in Mexico and after the Spanish-American War in the Philippines. The "manifest destiny" of America was to do whatever it wanted to do, because it was strong and virtuous and chosen by God.

Today many Americans celebrate a "strong" leader who, like Woodrow Wilson, never wavers, never apologizes, never admits a mistake, never changes his mind, a leader with a firm "Christian" faith in his own righteousness. These Americans are delighted that he ignores the rest of the world and punishes the World Trade Center terrorism in Iraq. Mr. Bush is our kind of guy.

He is not another Hitler. Yet there is a certain parallelism. They have in common a demagogic appeal to the worst side of a country's heritage in a crisis. Bush is doubtless sincere in his vision of what is best for America. So too was Hitler. The crew around the president -- Donald Rumsfeld, John Ashcroft, Karl Rove, the "neo-cons" like Paul Wolfowitz -- are not as crazy perhaps as Himmler and Goering and Goebbels. Yet like them, they are practitioners of the Big Lie -- weapons of mass destruction, Iraq democracy, only a few "bad apples."

Hitler's war was quantitatively different from the Iraq war, but qualitatively both were foolish, self-destructive and criminally unjust. This is a time of great peril in American history because a phony patriotism and an America-worshipping religion threaten the authentic American genius of tolerance and respect for other people.

The "real" America is still remembered here in Berlin for the enormous contributions of the Marshall Plan and the Berlin airlift -- America at its best. It is time to return to that generosity and grace.

The strongest criticism that the administration levels at Sen. John Kerry is that he changes his mind. In fact, instead of a president who claims an infallibility that exceeds that of the pope, America would be much better off with a president who, like John F. Kennedy, is honest enough to admit mistakes and secure enough to change his mind.

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