

the same Connecticut Avenue apartment building as did Gene Vidal, and Gore's father recounted Long's lectures to a meek young desk clerk: "Why, when I was your age I would spend what little idle time I had with an instructive book not that racing form I see that you're now trying to hide. Of course I was not given to late-night dissipation in the fleshpots of the District of Columbia! Oh, you can't hide your ruinous habits from me! I can see by the trembling of your hands what demon rum is doing to you..."

Vidal supplies the punchline: "Only my father's arrival with his car would stop the great flow of language, and Huey would cadge a ride from the director of air commerce while lecturing my father on aviation."

Vidal wrote about his World War II service in *Palimpsest* (1995), his previous memoir, and in the decade since he has not joined the Greatest Generation orgy: "during the three years I spent in the army I never heard a single patriotic remark from a fellow soldier, only grief for friends lost and, almost as often, a fierce grievance felt for those back home who were decimating our adolescent generation." Cue a Brokavian sigh.

Grief for friends lost. This is the pre-siding mood of *Point to Point Navigation*. The book is about death; almost all of its personae (Tennessee Williams, Johnny Carson, Saul Bellow, Paul Bowles, Federico Fellini) are on the other side of corporeity. Vidal also writes movingly of Howard Austen, his partner of 53 years, who died of lung cancer in 2003, when "we" ceased to be we and became "I."

As a "third-generation atheist" and "absolute nonbeliever" he takes no solace in the promise of eternal life, though you can't beat the view from his future resting place: Rock Creek Cemetery in the District of Columbia, hard by Henry and Clover Adams and Saint-Gaudens's "Grief" statue. "Two or three yards away Howard is buried as I shall be in due course when I take time off from my busy schedule," he writes. One

imagines Vidal and Adams, the two disappointed sons of our disappearing (disappeared?) Republic, trading aperçus unto time's end. Oh to be a fly on the sepulcher wall in that afterworld!

The author notes his own physical deterioration, though it appears the wit is the last to go. He is, as ever, just plain funny. Here is Vidal on vanity: "Generally, a narcissist is anyone anyone better looking than you are." And on standing up for the infant son of friends: "Always a godfather, never a god."

Or here is Vidal on Greta Garbo, whose favorite reading material was *Silver Screen*: "She kept up with all the new stars though I can't imagine she saw many of their pictures, but when it came to Fabian's romantic life she was au courant."

Vidal turned 81 in October, but he takes no pride in having outlived the subject of his life's work. "Our old original Republic does seem to be well and truly gone," he says in a line freighted with sadness. A son, a loving if irreverent son, of that old Republic has watched the precious thing die, and a new entity, bearing the same name, but "more and more secretive and remote not to mention repressive," supplant it.

"Didn't it go by awfully fast?" a dying Howard Austen asked Vidal. It sure did.

Gore Vidal is an American original. No, make that an original American. He despises cant, hypocrisy, foreign wars, and martial intellectuals on the make. He cherishes the old American Republic. I laugh aloud reading him. I take heart that he is still out there, an improbable—but, when you think about it, perfectly and delightfully meet—blend of Edmund Wilson and Huey Long, T.P. Gore and Henry Adams.

"As I now move graciously, I hope, toward the door marked Exit," Vidal begins one sentence. Don't go yet, Gore. Henry Adams can wait. We American patriots have so much left to do. ■

Bill Kauffman's most recent book is Look Homeward, America: In Search of Reactionary Radicals and Front-Porch Anarchists (ISI Books).

[*Five Germanys I Have Known, Fritz Stern, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 546 pages*]

From Breslau to Morningside Heights

By Philip Weiss

FRITZ STERN was supposed to follow in the family calling of three generations and become a doctor in the German city of Breslau (now Wrocław in Poland). Events interceded. In 1932, when he was 6, his parents gave him a typewriter, and then next year Hitler came to power. Five years after, the family, who were Christians but of Jewish stock, fled for America. The boy had by then become the family's secretary and was hoarding pieces of writing that interested him, down to scraps of newspaper. He grew up to be a historian, publishing several important volumes about German and Jewish history, of which this beautifully-written memoir is the most soulful. In a sense Stern never abandoned the family profession: at 80, he is trying to heal himself and heal Germany—and even heal the Jews.

Stern loves Germany, and his memoir is best understood as a demonstration that all societies are vulnerable to the evil forces that swept that land in the '30s and '40s. His epiphany came on a trip he made back to Germany in 1954, to attend a tenth-year memorial service for the July plot by German officers to kill Hitler, a plot that led instead to the torture and execution of the brave conspirators. "As I looked at the people in the courtyard—old, distinguished, and sadly proud, dressed in mourning, faces hardened and humbled by suffering—I felt a sense of shame for my indiscriminate hatred of Germans," he writes. The accumulation of such moments forced Stern at a late age to overcome his natural reluctance to write about himself. He understands

what an unusual life he has had and how instructive it can be.

The first of Stern's five Germanys was the Weimar Republic. He was born in 1926 into the assimilated Jewish elite. Jews had risen to new prominence in "most realms of public life," but that did not keep them from "self-criticism," sometimes joking, sometimes "harsh." Religion tended to be a private matter, but everyone knew who was what.

His grandparents had converted to Christianity, yet the family never abandoned its Jewish identity, its sense of an elite intellectual inheritance. The complexity of the situation can be seen in the case of Stern's godfather, the Nobel Prize-winning chemist Fritz Haber, a friend of Zionist Chaim Weizmann and the inventor of a poison gas that was later used by the Nazis. Haber was a convert. But he was somehow able "to fuse a nominal Christian identity with a kind of civic religion, Germanness, and a private Jewish identity..."

Private became public with the Third Reich. For years the Stern family bargained that the nationalistic nonsense about Aryans would not last, even as the civil service was purged by the 1935 Nuremberg laws and Jewish doctors were stripped of public duties (to the satisfaction of many German doctors, who couldn't compete).

Young Stern knew now that he was Jewish. He attended a gymnasium at which math problems were framed in terms of, "If three Jews rob a bank..." and on a family outing he read a piece of doggerel on a sign outside a village: "Trust not the fox on the green heath, and not the Jew when he gives his oath."

Eight decades later, the author asks, "Why does this piece of filthy trash remain in my head?" The answer is obvious: this was living history.

Most of my classmates were in the Hitler Youth, and on special days (the Fuhrer's birthday, for example) they would appear in their uniforms. Even without them, their pride in things German and Nazi and their joy in communal belong-

ing were tangible. At times I was a target of verbal and, in the schoolyard, physical assault ... I have forgotten, or perhaps repressed, much of the unpleasantness, probably because it was so minor compared with the horrors visited later on others, but I do remember the indoctrinations, the celebratory assemblies, the Heil Hitlers that I neither could nor would say, the hateful songs, the party sermons...

In 1938, the Stern family escaped, and Stern's father relaunched his medical practice in New York, though it seems that young Fritz held the family together. At 12, he was composing the correspondence for his shell-shocked family, reading Thucydides, and going to a Hoboken pier to greet other refugees. How many other boys would have spotted Thomas Mann and his brother in the crowd?

Portraiture became Stern's strong suit. He made his name with a study of three early German nationalists and anti-Semites and solidified it with a study of Gerson Bleichroder, a Jewish banker who advised Bismarck. For nearly 50 years, Stern was a professor at Columbia University. In that time, he gained access to many a powerful chamber and, happily, this book includes some reports.

There is Henry Kissinger, who would have been a high-school teacher in Furth, he tells Stern, were it not for Hitler. When Stern criticizes Nixon, the secretary of state responds, "Don't forget, he is not my president," a reminder that he had supported Rockefeller. "What sublime disloyalty!" Stern comments.

When he meets Pope John Paul II, Stern tells him that Asian-Americans have taken the place of American Jews in schools. The pope says, "Yes, but they still control the media and finance." (Stern says, "I was stunned.")

Leading Jews from Einstein to Weizmann also make appearances. The historian Isaiah Berlin refuses to shake Menachem Begin's hand, for he remembers the Jewish terrorism of the 1940s. The Zionist Nahum Goldmann comes to Ger-

many to negotiate reparations and says that Jews are "a people one can admire but one cannot love. They are wonderful when they are persecuted. They are impossible when they have it good."

As the author returns to Germany again and again, the reader sees that he is German at the core. In a book that involves identity, what does core mean? The feeling arises from Stern's story that he is made by the German language and longs for the sensibilities that German words are able to pluck. Those words come in and out of the book. *Schmökern*, the love of light reading. *Schlicht*, a kind of simple, unostentatious elegance. *Lebenhüge*, a lie on which a life is based. *Wissenschaft*, the body of documented knowledge. Nietzsche and Goethe are frequently cited and so is the idea that is central to Stern's sense of himself: *Bildung*, the "goal of self-formation and education that sprang in part from knowing and exulting in the great works of culture ..."

OK, then: explain Nazism. "Never before had a modern, educated, proudly civilized class so readily abandoned, betrayed, and traduced the most basic rights of citizens. Why? Fear? Willing acquiescence and complicity? Indifference? The questions haunt us still." Stern's best answer is that the religious and nationalist appeals that carried away a fearful and humiliated people can carry away other high-minded cultures. For all states struggle with "illiberal" forces and periods of "exaltation." (As do rival administrators at Columbia: "If they had nuclear weapons, I thought, they would use them.")

I can only hope that Stern's comments about Israel get publicity. They are so understated yet backed by such intimate knowledge of anti-Semitism and the Zionist brain trust that no one can write them off. The last of the 20th-century utopias is now endangered by "self-betrayal," militarism and nationalism. Israelis are incapable of accepting criticism from foreigners. Indeed the Holocaust seems to have hardened them in their contempt for critics. But Stern has studied the "harsh truths" of Israel's 1948 war for independence and is per-

plexed by the public denial of evidence that Zionists forced a flood of Arabs from the land—"a pertinent question, especially for those of us concerned about 'forgetting.'" Unlike so many other prominent Americans who have been to Israel and simply marveled at the society, Stern has also visited the West Bank and is grieved by the occupation. Palestinian refugees "had been made to suffer for the crimes of omission and commission that the Europeans had committed against the Jews."

I wish he had brought these lessons home. The chief fault of this book is Stern's resistance to taking on the historian's "metaphysical fluency and ... arrogance" (intellectual qualities he praises in Hannah Arendt) when it comes to Jewish history in the United States. He does not apply to the American scene his knowledge of Bleichroder's presence at Bismarck's side or of the German nationalists' fury toward modernity. This reader kept waiting for Stern's opinion on such issues as: How powerful are Jews in America? How does their role in the economy and the professions compare to Weimar? The obvious question is of course whether our society is capable of seeking the extermination of Jews, but just as interesting is whether the Jewish role in the American establishment has hampered our ability to relate to the Arab world. As it is, the neoconservatives are only glimpsed here, for instance in a crack about how much money Richard Perle has made.

I found one lesson between the lines. In 1954 Stern is traveling on a boat back to Germany when he hears the news of the Supreme Court's landmark desegregation decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The reader exults with him: a great blot was removed from his adopted society, and Stern was able to bring out to Europe a demonstration of the noble American experiment. That was a very long time ago. ■

Philip Weiss is at work on a book about Jewish issues. He writes a blog for the New York Observer, Mondoweiss.

[*Bully Boy: The Truth About Theodore Roosevelt's Legacy*, Jim Powell, Crown Forum, 336 pages]

Truth to Executive Power

By Thomas E. Woods Jr.

A FAIRLY RELIABLE rule of thumb when it comes to books on history and politics is that whatever *Publishers Weekly* advises you to do, spare no expense in doing the exact opposite.

An excellent case in point is Jim Powell's new book, *Bully Boy: The Truth About Theodore Roosevelt's Legacy*. Its author, *Publishers Weekly* informs us, "sees Roosevelt as a dangerous tyrant who sought to expand the power of the executive office in order to promote his own interests." Powell's book is "irresponsible revisionism at its worst."

Now you might think *Publishers Weekly*, in the Age of Bush, would be more inclined than usual to look with sympathy on a book that holds the executive branch, and those who contributed to its expansion, up to fresh scrutiny, but being a 21st-century liberal means attributing all government wickedness to the uniquely perverse George W. Bush. The possibility that the Source of All Iniquity may be building upon precedents set by his predecessors, including those who our intellectual class has told us belong to the ranks of our "great presidents," is to be rejected with a kind of indignant horror.

Powell's study of TR is truly withering. It's one thing to argue that taxes are too high, that eminent domain has been abused, or that maybe Bill Clinton shouldn't have bombed that pharmaceutical plant in Sudan. What's so "irresponsible" about Powell's book is that it goes well beyond obvious cases like these and looks critically even at those government initiatives that everyone knows are indispensable and wonderful and that are taught to schoolchildren as evidence of the marvels of democracy.

Responsible people stick to the script: the state protects you, the state fosters prosperity, the state pursues justice, and without the state every one of you would revert instantly to barbarism. The cartoon version of TR's presidency that Powell seeks to overturn reinforces these civic myths, which is why our betters so often trot him out as a "great" or "near-great" president.

Thus the very accomplishments that the standard text cites on behalf of TR's greatness are what Powell uses to hang him. It hasn't exactly hurt TR's reputation that arguments on his behalf fit neatly into the space of a bumper sticker ("He made our food safe!" "He tamed big business!" "He protected the environment!"), while the inevitably more nuanced and accurate rendition of these historical episodes requires many pages of explanation. That, at last, is what Jim Powell has done in *Bully Boy*.

Decades before Powell's book there was Henry Pringle's unflattering study, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Biography*, but Pringle's analysis was uneven, and in any case his book is long out of print. Powell's book differs from Pringle's in that, rather than being merely an unfavorable biography, it is a self-conscious critique of Roosevelt and his legacy.

That critique is especially refreshing given the cross-ideological adulation that TR has enjoyed for a full century. The neoconservative Right loves him because in TR's rhetoric and leadership style they perceive the birth pangs of "national greatness conservatism," while the hopeless Left, which weeps over the Bush administration's lawlessness, can be counted on to cheer the lawlessness of TR because, well, his target was big business.

With certain New Left exceptions, moreover, the Left typically celebrates TR's contributions to the federal regulatory apparatus, quaintly taking the comic-book version of the story—why, these agencies were established by disinterested public-sector crusaders to protect the public from unscrupulous businessmen!—at face value. (Why the Left can be withering on the official