

The British Blunder

In attacking my new book, *Churchill, Hitler, and the Unnecessary War*, Victor Davis Hanson, the court historian of the neoconservatives, charges me with

“rewriting ... facts” and showing “ingratitude” to American and British soldiers who fought World Wars I and II. Both charges are false, and transparently so.

Hanson cites not a single fact I got wrong and ignores the fact that the book is dedicated to my mother’s four brothers, who fought in World War II. Moreover, the book begins by celebrating the greatness of the British nation and heroism of its soldier-sons. Did Hanson even read it?

The focus of *The Unnecessary War* is the colossal blunders by British statesmen that reduced Britain from the greatest empire since Rome into an island dependency of the United States in three decades. It is a cautionary tale, written for America, which is treading the same path Britain trod in the early 20th century.

Hanson agrees that the Versailles Treaty of 1919 was “flawed,” but says Germany had it coming for the harsh peace the Germans imposed on France in 1871 and Russia in 1918.

Certainly, the amputation of Alsace-Lorraine by Bismarck’s Germany was a blunder that engendered French hatred and a passion for revenge. But does Teutonic stupidity in 1871 justify British stupidity in 1919?

In 1918, Germany accepted an armistice on Wilson’s 14 Points, laid down her arms, and surrendered her High Seas Fleet. Yet once disarmed, Germany was subjected to a starvation blockade, denied the right to fish in the Baltic Sea, and saw all her colonies and private property therein confiscated by British, French, and Japanese imperialists, in naked violation of Wilson’s 14 Points. Germans,

Austrians, and Hungarians by the millions were then consigned to Belgium, France, Italy, Serbia, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Poland, and Lithuania in violation of the principle of self-determination.

Germany was dismembered, disarmed, saddled with unpayable debt, and forced, under threat of further starvation and invasion, to confess she alone was morally responsible for the war—which was a lie, and the Allies knew it.

Where was Hitler born? “At Versailles,” replied Lady Astor.

As for the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk Germany imposed on Russia in 1918, is Hanson aware that the prison house of nations for which he wails, which was forced to disgorge Finland, the Baltic republics, Poland, Ukraine, and the Caucasus, was ruled by Bolsheviks? Was it a war crime for the Kaiser to break up Lenin’s evil empire? Two years after Brest-Litovsk, Churchill urged Britain to revise Versailles, bring Germany into the Allied fold, and intervene in Russia’s civil war against Lenin and Trotsky.

As for my thesis that the British war guarantee to Poland of March 31, 1939, was the fatal blunder that guaranteed World War II and brought down the British Empire, Hanson is mocking: “Buchanan argues that, had the imperialist Winston Churchill not pushed poor Hitler into a corner, he would have never invaded Poland in 1939, which triggered an unnecessary Allied response.”

First, Hanson should get his prime ministers straight. It was Neville Chamberlain who issued the war guarantee to Poland after the collapse of his Munich Accord.

Churchill was not even in the cabinet.

Second, Hanson implies that I portray Hitler as a misunderstood victim. This is mendacious. Hitler’s foul crimes are fully related.

Third, was it moral for Britain to promise the Poles military aid they could not and did not deliver, thus steeling Polish resolve to resist Hitler and guaranteeing Poland’s annihilation? Was it wise for Britain to declare a world war on the strongest nation in Europe over a town, Danzig, where the British prime minister thought Germany had the stronger claim?

What were the consequences for Poland of trusting in Britain? Crucifixion on a Nazi-Soviet cross, the Katyn massacre of the Polish officer corps, Treblinka and Auschwitz, annihilation of the Home Army, millions of brave Polish dead, half a century of Bolshevik terror.

And how did Churchill honor Britain’s commitment to Poland? During trips to Moscow, Churchill bullied the Polish prime minister into ceding to Stalin that half of his country Stalin had gotten from his devil’s pact with Hitler, and yielded to Stalin’s demand for annexation of the Baltic republics and Bolshevik rule of a dozen nations of Eastern and Central Europe.

Was it worth 50 million dead so Stalin, whose victims, as of Sept. 1, 1939, were 1,000 times Hitler’s, could occupy not only Poland, for which Britain went to war, but all of Christian Europe to the Elbe?

Churchill was right when he told FDR in December 1941 it was “the unnecessary war” and right again in 1948, when he wrote that in Stalin the world now faced “even worse perils” than those of Hitler. So what had it all been for?

Historian Hanson should go back to tutoring undergrads about the Peloponnesian War and Syracuse Expedition. ■

From Beirut to Bin Laden

Instead of maintaining its independence of action in the Mideast, the U.S. has backed one dangerous regime after another.

By James Webb

IN THE LATE SUMMER and early fall of 1983, I spent time as a journalist in Beirut, covering the Marine peacekeeping force that in October of that year lost more than 240 dead in a suicide bombing at the Beirut airport. The governing structure of Lebanon in the 1980s closely resembled that of Iraq today: a weak central government surrounded by powerful, armed militias engaged in a many-sided civil war, with a stronger nation—in this case Syria rather than Iran—looking menacingly over its shoulder.

On any given day in Beirut, one never knew who was going to shoot at whom, or for what reason. Travelers could not even fly into the Beirut airport in mid-1983. The United States Marines were defending it on the ground, but the Druze militia had pockmarked the airfield with artillery shells and kept it under continuous surveillance from the nearby Chouf Mountains, making the airfield unusable. To reach Beirut, our television crew took a flight from Athens to Larnaca, Cyprus, where at midnight we boarded a reeking old steamer that crossed an ocean passage in the darkness, bringing us to the Beirut seaport. The steamer was packed with a mix of Lebanese and international customers, and the old man who operated the small ship was very happy because the closed airport in Beirut was bringing him a bonanza. We sat all night in his dining area, smoking cigarettes, drinking beer, and eating his homemade sandwiches. It

seemed as though he was selling the beer and sandwiches for five of anything—five francs, five dollars, five marks. There was no alternative, and the food in Beirut would be just as random, so we were glad to pay.

In the early morning, we docked at the port of Beirut. Just next to us, a French military ship was unloading fresh troops, weapons, and supplies. A British army unit was also in Beirut, just off a tour in Northern Ireland. An Italian army unit also had joined the four-nation peacekeeping effort. The French, who along with our Marines would suffer a serious suicide bombing attack in October, were all business as their ship unloaded its cargo. A platoon of their soldiers had set up in a hasty perimeter, lying on the dirt-packed berms above the water's edge. Even though the port activities and the customs house near the harbor seemed to bustle with normalcy, their rifles were pointed toward the city.

It sprawled before us, brightly colored, sand-burnt, many parts of it broken into pieces by years of conflict. From the water's edge inward, Beirut was a place of latent chaos, scarred with memories of violence. The streets leading from the port opened up into the infamous Green Line, a dividing street between different ethnic and religious sects where a once beautiful part of the city was now obliterated, cratered, and ruined. The Green Line was haunting, lifeless and silent. Driving through it, I

was reminded of the pictures I had seen of Dresden following the Allied bombings of World War II.

Beirut, once the playground of the Arab world, was now living inside a conundrum, still pulsing with energy yet powerless to recapture its former stability and charm. Various Sunni, Shia, Christian, and Druze militias and submilitias, and factions and subfactions, were slugging it out with a vicious randomness in a civil war that had begun eight years before. And the Syrians, who have historically considered Lebanon part of Greater Syria, had a habit of rising like armed referees every now and then from over the horizon to join the fray.

In one typical engagement that I covered, a United States Marine outpost was brought under fire by a Druze militia position after the Druze had been shot at by Lebanese army soldiers from a checkpoint on a nearby road. Eventually, a Syrian unit began firing heavy machine guns at both the Marines and the "Lebs" from a position on the far side of a distant string of hills. All the while, in the far distance, the Christian Phalange militia was engaged in an artillery duel with another unit that we were unable to identify. Artillery shells hammered into six-story apartment buildings, smacking their outside walls and making sprays of dust. The lights were out inside the buildings. The occupants had already fled to return only if there were to happen, somehow, to be a ceasefire.