

Reader of the Free World

A literary luncheon with the president.

BY IRWIN M. STELZER

Anyone who thinks President George W. Bush is spending sleepless nights worrying about the machinations of the Democratic Congress, or figuring out how a lame duck president can limp from the political battlefield with honor intact, had better think again. And anyone who likes to regale his friends with references to that illiterate cowboy in the White House is due for some considerable embarrassment when the nonpartisan studies of the Bush years begin to hit the bookshops.

Those are two of the conclusions I reached watching the president in action at a luncheon—more accurately, a seminar—he convened last week to discuss the most recent of the many histories he has read, Andrew Roberts's splendid *History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900*, a tome that picks up where Winston Churchill's four volumes on the subject left off. Among those joining the president and Roberts at last week's White House lunch were the distinguished Victorian historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, neocon intellectual Norman Podhoretz, Paul Gigot, editor of the *Wall Street Journal's* influential editorial page, theologian Michael Novak, and a smattering of journalists.

"History informs the present," the president had said at another of these meetings to which he invites small groups of writers, historians, and pundits to discuss some work that has caught his eye. On this occasion the president said he had three goals—to

get more people to read Roberts's book, to see what the history of the English-speaking peoples has to teach us today, and to "pander to you powerful opinion makers." That last combination of candor and flattery was disarming in the extreme.

On one subject the president needed no lessons from Roberts or anyone else in the room: how to handle pressure. "I just don't feel any," he says with the calm conviction of a man who believes the constituency to which he must ultimately answer is the Divine Presence. Don't misunderstand: God didn't tell him to put troops in harm's way in Iraq; belief in Him only goes so far as to inform the president that there is good and evil. It is then his job to figure out how to promote the former and destroy the latter. And he is confident that his policies are doing just that.

His dealings with Tony Blair and the Blair team have made him well aware that this view contributes to European nervousness about his political decisions. Bush, who must have more things on his mind than the names of minor U.K. political figures, did remember that it was Blair's media guru, one Alastair Campbell—hardly a household name in Washington—who interrupted a Tony Blair press conference to say, "We don't do God." And he frowned as he recalled that Blair's poll-driven advisers had dissuaded the prime minister from saying "God bless you" to the British troops he was sending off to Iraq.

All of this led the president to turn the conversation to the old question of what exactly is "evil" and what constitutes "good." The discussion centered on Novak's contention that although

there is indeed "evil," there is no such thing as absolute "good." Bush didn't buy that line, preferring to agree with Podhoretz's rejection of Arthur Koestler's conclusion that man is in a battle between black and "various shades of gray." Bush's formulation is that we are engaged in a war between absolute evil and good *principles*, which principles are, the president readily admitted, practiced by imperfect men.

Discussion then turned to the special relationship of America with Great Britain, and how it will be affected by Blair's retirement in a few months' time. Roberts told the president that Washington would have no problem with Gordon Brown, who will almost certainly succeed Blair as leader of the Labour party and prime minister. Brown admires America, is unlikely to pull troops out of Iraq and Afghanistan, and will continue to support Britain's nuclear submarine program. Tory Leader David Cameron, said this self-styled "Thatcherite Tory" historian, is another matter. In a reprise of several talks delivered in Washington last week, Roberts spoke with a mixture of sadness and annoyance of Cameron's appalling speech on the fifth anniversary of September 11, which called on America to be "patient" and on Britain to end its "slavish" deference to the United States. That, along with Tory foreign-policy spokesman William Hague's attack on Israel for its "disproportionate" response to Hezbollah's kidnapping of one of its soldiers and cross-border rocket attacks, means a Tory victory would bode ill for the special relationship.

Bush was unperturbed. The special relationship is "unbelievably powerful," he said, and transcends such differences as exist between any given president and prime minister. "Who would have thought that a left-of-center prime minister and a conservative president could combine as we have done to try to bring democracy to Iraq?"

But the president did want to know more about the extent and reasons for the rise of anti-American feeling in Britain. "Is it due simply to my personality?" he

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wondered, half-seriously. "Is it confined to intellectuals?" asked a guest. Roberts led with a reminder that no British intellectual would style himself an "intellectual," prompting the president to add, "Neither would a Texas politician." The combined Roberts-Stelzer response: The causes of rampant anti-Americanism do indeed include dislike of Bush. But there are others: the war in Iraq; anti-Israel, pro-Palestinian sentiment, laced with some covert anti-Semitism; and resentment of American power. Roberts urged the president not to concern himself with these anti-American feelings, since in a unipolar world the lone superpower cannot be loved. His advice: "Get your policies right and history will prove a kind muse."

I added an anecdote, recalling that my wife, Cita, and I abruptly left a posh London dinner party when the guests began attacking Bush and the United States. "Many thanks for that, but you'd better not move to New York City or you will starve to death," advised the president, bringing a hardy "Amen" from the New Yorkers.

On to the lessons of history, as taught by Andrew Roberts. First: Do not set a deadline for withdrawal. That led to the slaughter of 700,000 to 1 million people in India, with the killing beginning one minute after the midnight deadline. Bush wondered if there are examples of occupying forces remaining for long periods of time, other than in Korea. Malaysia, said Roberts, where it took nine years to defeat the Communists, after which the occupying troops remained for several years. And Algeria, added Bush, citing Alistair Horne's *A Savage War of Peace* for the proposition that more Algerians were killed after the French withdrawal than during the French occupation.

Second lesson: Will trumps wealth. The Romans, the tsars, and other rich world powers fell to poorer ones because they lacked the will to fight and survive. Whereas World War II was almost over before Americans saw the first picture of a dead soldier, today the steady drumbeat of media pessimism and television coverage are sap-

ping the West's will.

Third lesson: Don't hesitate to intern our enemies for long, indefinite periods of time. That policy worked in Ireland and during World War II. Release should only follow victory.

Lesson four: Cling to the alliance of the English-speaking peoples. Although many nations have joined the coalition in Iraq and Afghanistan, troops from Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand are doing the heavy lifting. U.S. policy supporting the European constitution, and closer involvement of Britain in the E.U., should be reversed. Had there been a European constitution, Britain "would have been unable to help you in Iraq."

Fifth lesson: We are fighting an enemy that cannot be appeased; were that possible, the French would already have done it—a Roberts quip that elicited a loud chuckle from the president.

The closing note was a more serious one. Roberts said that history would judge the president on whether he had prevented the nuclearization of the Middle East. If Iran gets the bomb, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other countries will follow. "That is why I am so pleased to be sitting here rather than in your chair, Mr. President." There was no response, other than a serious frown and a nod.

Exactly one hour after we had taken our seats, the president announced that he has to work for a living, and adjourned the luncheon seminar. It is fair to say that the few people I spoke with as we left shared my impression. Here is a man who is comfortable in his own skin; whose religious faith guides him in his search for the good, without leading him to think he has a private line to God to find out just what policies will serve that purpose; who worries less about his "legacy" than about his standing with the Almighty; who is quite well read (in addition to Roberts's monumental history, Bush has circulated copies of Natan Sharansky's *The Case for Democracy* to his staff, and recommended Mark Steyn's *America Alone*); and who believes that the president of the United States must be, to use his much-derided coinage, "the decider." ♦

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