

## HITLER'S BIRTHDAY

# The legacies of lame ducks and dictators

By WILLIAM B. FISCHER

Each year around April 20, the birthday of Adolf Hitler, I try to remind my German-language students of the horrors of the Third Reich and the Holocaust. I show the pictures of the starved, mangled corpses and cite the outrageous numbers. I memorialize the great scientists and artists, and the nameless masses, who were murdered or driven into exile.

I show my students the bill the Nazis sent to the family of one of the 3,000 dissidents who were executed, by guillotine or slow strangulation, at just *one* prison, Plötzensee, near Berlin. The "criminal's" family was charged for the victim's board and room, for the "defense" lawyer, for the executioner's work and even for the stamp used to mail the bill.

I say: Never forget. Never again. Then I stop. I leave the students to formulate, outside of class, their own conclusions about Germany and America, about past and present. I do not believe the classroom is a place for me to express my own opinions about today's political issues.

But here I write as a citizen. Throughout much of President Bush's two terms, the Bush-Hitler comparison has been offered up to us on protest signs and even in serious commentaries. In 2006 a student said to me, "Well, isn't America today sort of like Germany under Hitler?" My jaw dropped.

In this lame-duck last year of the Bush presidency, let us look back on its first seven years and compare them to Hitler's first seven years as chancellor of the Reich.

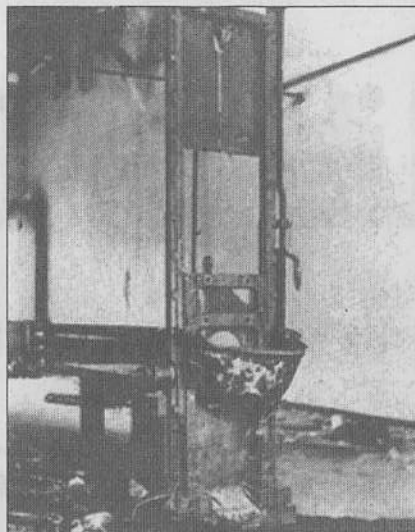
Little more than seven *hours* after Hitler was installed in office (Jan. 30, 1933), the authorities halted a protest message that was being delivered on radio by the great German theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Seven

*years* after Bush was installed in office (Jan. 20, 2001), nothing remotely comparable has happened to the media or, much less, individual free speech. (The Nazis hanged Bonhoeffer on April 9, 1945, three weeks before World War II ended.)

Within seven *days* after Hitler came to power, thousands of his opponents, prominent and nameless, were being detained, brutalized, killed. Within seven *weeks* of that, the camp at Dachau was running. Seven *years* after Bush's first inauguration, Noam Chomsky, Michael Moore, Cindy Sheehan, Howard Dean, Barack Obama, Hillary and Bill Clinton, and countless vociferous dissidents, mainstream politicians and assorted noncooperators are still alive and well, not incarcerated in death camps or long ago murdered.

Seven years after Hitler became chancellor of the Reich, supreme commander and self-titled Greatest Military Leader of all Times, Germany was at war with the European Allies. Even during the victorious *Blitzkrieg* drive through France, Germany often suffered as many military dead in *one day* as America has suffered in *all seven years* of Iraq and Afghanistan. WWII German military dead amounted to 3.5 million, which is more than *ten* times the number of all American WWII military dead (292,000), and a *thousand* times the American dead in Iraq. Even German *civilian* WWII dead (750,000) amounted to nearly three times the American *military* WWII dead and more than a *hundred* times the American *civilian* WWII dead (6,000).

Unlike Hitler, we also care about the casualties we inflict on other countries, races and peoples. In the four years that the Final Solution was fully in operation, Jews died at a rate of one 9/11 *every day*. Soviets died at more than twice that rate, for a total of 18 million



PLÖTZENSEE MEMORIAL CENTER

**From 1933 to 1945, nearly 3,000 people sentenced to death by Nazi Germany's judiciary were executed by guillotine or other means at the Plötzensee prison. Today the site commemorates the victims of National Socialism.**

(but the Soviet population was much larger than the Jewish). In both instances, Hitler's declared policy was genocide. There was no talk of minimizing collateral casualties or flying wounded children to German hospitals for reconstructive surgery.

In the spring of 1945, 12 years after Hitler took power and immediately ended meaningful elections, the Allies imposed regime change in the Reich. After 1945, it took more than 40 years of a huge Allied military presence to finish creating democracy in Germany. In the spring of 2013, 12 years after President Bush was first inaugurated and four years after he will have laid down his office, in accord with the Constitution, another American presi-

dential inauguration will take place. Perhaps we will have had elected the nation's first female or black president. Ho hum.

American democracy is alive and well. But why? Not because Bush was thwarted by the heroic resistance of the Left, aided by the stalwart True Conservative Republicans and assorted Libertarians.

Why seek complex explanations when simple ones will do? One: American democracy has a historical record of robustness. But also two: Bush had no intention of overthrowing the Constitution and replacing the republic with a dictatorship. Asserting executive power in a time of crisis, even including restricting some rights ordinarily enjoyed in peacetime, is part of a president's job. It is the job of others — the courts, the legislative branch, the people — to question (or support) that assertion. Roosevelt, Wilson, Lincoln, Jefferson, Adams and Washington, to cite just some greats, behaved similarly. All but, perhaps, Washington pushed the limit even further than has Bush. The rhetoric was every bit as vicious as today's.

Nine years before Hitler became Führer, he led his *Putsch*, his failed attempt to overthrow the democratic government of Bavaria, often called Germany's Texas. He then wrote "Mein Kampf," his open-book plan for usurpation, dictatorship, imperial expansion and genocide. Then he made the book into reality. Nine years before George W. Bush became president in 2001, he was the owner of a baseball team. He was most probably not reading "Mein Kampf." And he certainly was not writing his own manual for dictatorship.

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