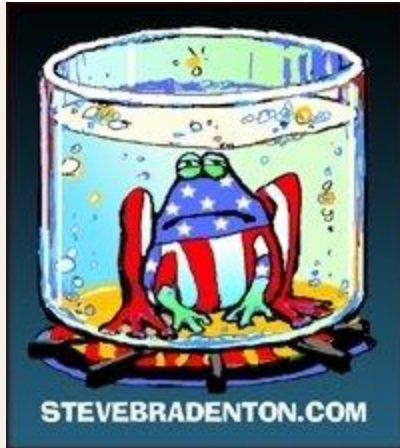


FRIDAY, MARCH 27, 2009

Seduced By Hitler: A Book Review





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"Seduced by Hitler: The Choices of a Nation and the Ethics of Survival" by Adam LeBor and Roger Boyes, Barnes and Nobel Books, N.Y. 2000 and 2005.
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Reviewed by James M. Craven/Omahkohkiaayo i'poyi
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This book gives clear examples and lessons of individuals, often basically decent until tested, participating in and fundamental to, their own repression, the repression of others along with the building and maintenance of the tyrannical orders and systems repressing them. It tells many stories of both various forms of "Faustian Bargains", as well as stories of courage and resistance in the face of tyrannical repression. The book also illustrates clearly the wisdom of the warning of Benjamin Franklin: Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety. Benjamin Franklin, Historical Review of Pennsylvania, 1759
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Perhaps Ben Franklin should have added that those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety, not only do not deserve, but also, they cannot and will never attain, real liberty and safety for themselves either. That lesson comes through over and over with vivid examples and the book spares no one from scrutiny. The authors are sensitive to the charge of judgmentalism by those judging responses to situations they have never faced and that are why they examine and contrast, the statements of those in the same circumstances in terms of the ultimate and very different choices--and consequences of those choices--they made.
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The book examines various types of Faustian Bargains without fear or favor yet with some sensitivity. For example, the inmate Sonderkommandos in death camps, who sometimes deceived their own families into going into the gas chambers quietly, knowing what awaited them, in order to trade, for a few more days, weeks or sometimes months, the trust of their family members for their own lives and some special privileges. It examines the camp inmate Kapos or inmate overseers, who were often more brutal than the Nazis, to show their "bona fides", in order to stay alive with special privileges. It examines the Germans and peoples of Occupied Territories who both turned away, and others who risked their lives not to turn away, those fleeing Nazi terror and intentions to exterminate them. It examines the narrow selfishness and narcissism of groups

obsessed with "identity politics", in which people, so proud of their group for no other reason than they were born or assimilated into it, caring nothing about the issues and threats faced by others; and yet, in the end, after all their indifference and selfishness, winding up begging of others, of the other groups about which they cared nothing, help to save themselves when they needed it.

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This book illustrates the hypocrisy, hubris and elaborate rationales, of those, who themselves violated, and/ engaged in willful blindness and depraved indifference to the violations of others, of the very same laws and protections that they constantly demanded for themselves. It shows with vivid examples, the daily ethical choices one must make not only to survive or have security in terms of what each person personally defines as "survival" or "security" for oneself and one's loved ones, but also what happens to choices made when the terms and definitions of social and personal notions of what really constitutes "survival" and "security" are rapidly changing.

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The Nazis, building on the work of Edward Bernays, the father of propaganda, spin and effective marketing, set up a vast and sophisticated system of propaganda and instruments of mass deception, distraction and seduction. They used branding and understood the maxim "If you brand it you own it." They used television (first TV broadcasts in the world in 1935) films like Riefenstahl's "Triumph of the Will", free radios (to hear constant propaganda and Hitler speeches), Nazi "aesthetics" in art (free of "imperfections"), Greco-Roman styles in architecture (to convey permanence and tradition) and grandiose rallies with stunning visuals, backgrounds, symbolism and hundreds of thousands of participants (to convey the supposed omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence of the Nazi state).

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The Nazis cynically used and misused, for purposes of propaganda and divide-and-rule, the construct of "nation". A nation is, under international law, a grouping of people who share common: territory, history, language and culture, economic life, politico-legal institutions, mechanisms and criteria for determining membership of the group and a desire to remain as a nation. The Nazis summarily de-nationalized from the historical Nation as "non-Germans", Jews and other targeted groups while summarily including in the nation, those of supposed German "blood" and requisite "blood-quantum" (a biologically bankrupt concept) no matter where they had lived or were living on the earth. It is an old device but the Nazis took it to a new level of sophistication: summarily declaring a contrived group to constitute a "Nation" and also declaring those as "chosen" to be within it, and thus those as "outcasts", not included within or not-recognizing it.

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The Nazis pioneered stunning visuals in film and art designed to demonstrate the omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence of—and thus futility and impossibility of resistance to---the State and Fuhrer. Riefenstahl's "Triumph of the Will", a film about the Nazi Party Congress September 4-10, 1934, opens with stunning visuals from inside Hitler's aircraft (Hitler was the first to use aircraft to travel to and address diverse regions in short periods of time) descending through the clouds, over the spires of cathedrals, like a God or "Messiah" sent from the heavens to "liberate" the German People and Nation. Perhaps it is analogous to Mr. Bush's majestic arrival and landing

on the aircraft carrier to a sign reading “Mission Accomplished”?

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The Nazis also pioneered the calculated uses of symbology and symbolism, mascots, appropriated significant dates in history, creations of revisionist histories, calculated myth and meme spreading and new calendars of significant dates. Like the Roman Emperor Constantine, who appropriated, co-opted and used traditional Roman Pagan holidays and festivals to create new Christian ones, the Nazis understood, that, from an effective propaganda and mass seduction point of view, it is far easier to appropriate and co-opt existing sacred dates, myths, symbols and festivals to new uses and interests, allowing the traditional ones to wither away with time, than to try to summarily abolish them altogether.

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This book also shows the use of humor as a form of resistance to dictatorship as well as how lethal humor can be under tyrannical systems. On July 28, 1944, Father Josef Muller was hanged for telling the following joke: “A wounded soldier on his death bed, asked to see, for the last time, those for who he had laid down his life. The nurses brought a picture of Hitler and laid it on his right side and a picture of Reichsmarshall Goering and laid it on his left side. The soldier then said: ‘Now I can die like Jesus Christ, between two criminals’”

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The authors also illustrate one of the few open acts of rebellion in Nazi Germany and how, for some, some forms of resistance were possible—and for narrow personal reasons. In February 1943, the Nazis launched a final roundup of Jews in Berlin to make Berlin “Judenrein” (free of Jews). Up to that point, and even up to the end of the war, many thousands of Jews lived underground (called “U-boats”) aided by non-Jews acting out of conscience at considerable risk to themselves. Some 2000 Jewish men, married to non-Jewish German women, were taken to Rossenstrasse 2-4 a welfare office for the Jewish community for deportation. Many of these men had highly-placed connections with German officials through marriage. The wives, unorganized, unarmed and not part of any resistance groups, conducted days of protests against the deportations of their husbands. Eventually, the Nazis had to back down out of fear of the secret of the “Final Solution” being exposed, as well as the damaging effects of killing women of “Aryan Blood”.

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The case of Klaus Von Stauffenberg and others involved in the July 20, 1944 plot to kill Hitler was explored but not fully developed. The authors do note that the plotters were all approached to kill Hitler in 1941 but refused to do so because then, they thought, the war against "Bolshevism" [in the East] was going well and their common "anti-Bolshevism" trumped any concerns about the real nature and likely fate of Nazism and the Nazi empire. Only when it was all coming down for the supposed "1000-Year Reich", less than a year from the final end of the Nazi Order, did they attempt to kill Hitler. What is not explored by the authors, is that the plot to kill Hitler failed only because Von Stauffenberg used a timed fuse for a bomb placed next to Hitler [later moved away from him] with enough time for him to exit and take Hitler's life and those of others in the bunker while saving his own. Whatever one might think of the often caricatured "suicide bombers" in places like the Middle East, had Von Stauffenberg been willing to give his

own life in order to make absolutely sure the job was done right, who knows how much earlier the war in Europe would have ended and how many lives would have been saved? But Von Stauffenberg, not only wound up dead shortly after, with Hitler still alive and even more vicious and reckless, but also, over 5,000 others, said to be part of the Plot to Kill Hitler, wound up also tortured and dead.

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The book illustrates how cognitive dissonance both shapes and constrains the choices, and rationales for those choices made. Cognitive dissonance is about the dissonance and psychologically and physiologically damaging effects of contradictions between facts versus beliefs, beliefs versus emotions (interests) and emotions versus facts. How to reconcile, considering oneself say "a Good..." (insert faith or secular non-Nazi ideology of your choice) and yet daily participating in, or turning a blind eye to, horrible crimes and forms of brutality that can never be justified by any sane reading of the supposed sacred books and principles of that faith or ideology? When the Nazis were plundering and pillaging all over the world, they all wore belt buckles that said "Gott Mit Uns" (God with us) above the symbol of the swastika.

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This belt buckle is dominated by the Nazi eagle perched on the swastika. The slogan which reads, "God is with us."

Photo: Phillip Drell

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And some of the rationales were something else: "It is not a conflict with God's will, rather it is to carry out God's will, that those who do not believe and/or are like plague-infested vermin threatening the general Order and "God's Chosen", must be sacrificed in order for those doing God's will to survive and continue His plan." And it gives the story of a young girl in a concentration camp, about to be gassed, and knowing what fate awaited her, asking an inmate Sonderkommando trying to deceive her as to what fate awaited her, why, what was there about him, that was so special, that he would even be able and willing to trade the lives of others, even his own family members, in order that he could survive for a little while more, and with him knowing, that her fate, would ultimately, and soon, be his fate also? What about the rationales, if any, of those literally trading the lives of their own loved ones, informing on them or deceiving them, in return for their own momentary survival? What about those, in contrast, under similar circumstances, who did not trade their lives for those of others?

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This book, like the warning of Benjamin Franklin, is prescient and applicable, perhaps urgent for our times. We all see and face ethical choices every day that have consequences on the lives of many others. What about those like the present Pope Benedict XVI, a member of the Hitler Youth as well as the Wehrmacht who finally and opportunistically deserted his post when the fog of war allowed it, who also had a choice, and duty, to seriously ponder, question and act, as others more threatened than he did, what being a "Team Player" in Nazi Germany and Occupied Territories really means? What does it mean and what does it lead to, when one does not even ask, or consider, or even care about asking questions like: "What is the real nature and are the intentions

of "The Team" on which I am expected to be a "Player"? " "What kinds of games--or worse--am I expected to be a "Player" and/or supporter of? That is why I do not trust anyone with a resume that says "Team Player" without any notion, or caveat, that it depends, of course, upon the real nature of "The Team" and the "games"--and their consequences on others as well as oneself--in which one is expected to "play" and thus be complicit as a "Player".

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This book also notes that out of a population of some 80 million People, the reach and wrath of the Gestapo (40,000 total) and supporting entities of the Nazi state apparatus, were over-stretched and highly reliant on everyday citizens informing on others. It also notes that more often than not, people would inform on others for revenge in personal matters, to acquire confiscated properties, because of romantic jealousies, because of narrow identity politics or just for kicks to feel better than others. The Nazi state apparatus was so overwhelmed with people using state resources for personal agenda, they had to issue warnings that anyone caught doing so, would face retribution themselves. This book illustrates over and over the wisdom of the maxim, stated via a character in Sean O' Casey's "The White Plague": "Nothing is so passionate as a vested interest disguised as an intellectual conviction."

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What about the parallels--and lessons--of those who planned various Nazi invasions, and the recent Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, founded, they knew at the time, on a body of lies, cherry picked intelligence, violations of international and domestic laws and actually engineered or phony pretexts? Eleven Nazis were sentenced to be hanged at Nuremberg for five basic and interrelated crimes: Waging Illegal and Aggressive Wars; Conspiracy; Crimes Against Peace; Crimes Against Humanity; War Crimes. What are the precedents and present-day parallels of the crimes charged at Nuremberg? What is the difference, if any, between the Nazi concept of "Blitzkrieg" and the present-day Neocon construct of "Shock and Awe"? What is the difference, if any, between the Nazi concept of the 1000-Year Reich and the Neocon concept of a global and unipolar "Pax Americana" or "The American Century"?

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Finally, the wisdom embodied in the metaphor of the "frog in the pan of water" is vividly illustrated over and over. When, the metaphor goes, one puts a frog in a pan of boiling water, the frog will thrash about and try desperately to escape. On the other hand, put the frog in cold water and very gradually turn up the heat, the frog will adapt to newer and higher temperatures and sit in the pan, without trying to escape, until it boils to death.

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The Weimar Constitution was never formally repealed; there was no need to. Daily, Germans surrendered their most basic civil and human rights, supposedly guaranteed by a constitution far more democratic than the U.S. Constitution. With each increment in repeal of basic rights, German citizens accepted and facilitated their own further repression under the banners of "patriotism", "national security", "chosen People or Nation", counter "terrorism", be a "Team Player", or, the final standby "shut up or next it will be you". As Hermann Goering put it at Nuremberg:

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"Why of course the people don't want war. Why should some poor slob on a farm want to risk his life in a war when the best he can get out of it is to come back to his farm in one piece? Naturally the common people don't want war neither in Russia, nor in England, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But, after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy, or a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the peacemakers for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country."

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The Nazis understood well the dialectical (two-way) unity between morale at home and morale of the troops at war. They understood that lots of body bags and protracted conflicts caused loss of support and morale at home that would be communicated through personal letters and visits on leave to troops in the field thus undermining their morale and fighting spirit... They also understood that losses of morale by troops in the field would be communicated to those at home and undermine their support at home for the wars. The Nazis therefore carefully sanitized and/or kept separate bad news at home from those troops in the field and vice versa.

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The role of the intellectuals, not only as theoreticians and functionaries, but as outright street thugs of Nazism is also explored. The German Jewish diarist Victor Klemperer wrote in 1936:

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"If the fate [of the Nazis] lay in my hands... I would have all the intellectuals strung up, and the professors three feet higher than the rest; they would be left hanging from the lamp-posts for as long as was compatible with hygiene." (quoted in Himmler's Crusade: The Nazi Expedition to Find the Origins of the Aryan Race" by Christopher Hale, Castle Books, Edison, N.J... 2003, p.1)

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What comes through loud and clear is the construct developed by Hannah Arendt from her experiences at the Eichmann Trial in Tel Aviv: "The Banality of Evil". Instead of finding the three-headed monster she expected, Arendt found instead a rather ordinary, even pathetic individual, who looked like a clerk, calmly and clinically describing how he just "followed orders" and was what every boss wants—"a real team player"—in the course of making sure that the transportation of genocide ran efficiently and on time. It was also the Eichmann Trial, and the construct of "The Banality of Evil" that led Yale Psychologist Stanley Milgram to conduct his famous studies on the willingness of "ordinary individuals" and even "refined intellectuals" to administer pain to total strangers on the basis of the most spurious rationales and authority. At the infamous Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942 to plan the logistics and legal rationale for "The Final Solution", of the 15 high-level Nazis present, nine held doctorates and eight were lawyers.

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This is a book with many lessons about human behavior, treachery, heroism, mob psychology, and ethical choices under difficult and even fatal conditions. It is about how

"good people can do and do bad things". It is about how sometimes, even, some apparently bad people can wind up doing some good things, often for conflicting reasons (like SS butcher Wilhelm Kube who thought German Jews deserved a better fate than Slavic ones because they after all spoke German and were more cultured). It is about how they go about rationalizing the choices they make and often not doing to or for others what they would clearly want--and often begged for under new circumstances--done to or for themselves.

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This is also a book with some profound lessons and examples very applicable today in many venues. These lessons, paid for with a lot of blood and misery, we ignore at our own peril.

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