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democracy in our own age.

If Bitburg was a political embarrassment to Ronald Reagan, and far from a triumph for Helmut Kohl, for Jews it was an opportunity—for many too many a lost one—to make it clear to themselves just how stern and relentless is the real task of remembering the Holocaust and keeping faith with their dead.

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(Midge Decter is executive director of the Committee for the Free World.)

The American Jewish Committee At The White House Special Contribution

By Rabbi Mark H. Tanenbaum

(Rabbi Tanenbaum is the Director of the Department of International Relations of the American Jewish Committee.)

On May 5, 1985, President Ronald Reagan, in keeping with a promise he made to West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl in November 1984, joined the Chancellor in a formal wreath-laying visit to the German military cemetery at Bitburg. The 10-minute silent stop, far less elaborate than the ceremonies originally planned, was carried out despite ever-widening dismay, in the U.S. and abroad, over the planned Bitburg visit. The criticism, which began when the White House announced that the President would not stop at the Dachau concentration camp during his German trip, exploded into a firestorm when it was revealed that the Bitburg cemetery included the graves of some four dozen members of the Waffen SS—the Nazi elite guard implicated in wanton atrocities against U.S. prisoners of war and innocent civilians in Nazi-occupied countries, and directly involved in carrying out Hitler's "final solution" for European Jewry.

Jewish and veterans' groups were understandably the first to raise objections to the President's itinerary. The AJC's Washington representative, Hyman Bookbinder, protested to the White House immediately after the plans were officially announced on April 10. But it did not take long for Americans of every religion and background to grasp and express how insensitive and inappropriate to the intended theme of reconciliation they felt the Bitburg visit to be.

How that broadened understanding evolved, and how the White House was

ultimately persuaded—when all efforts to convince the President to cancel his visit to Bitburg had failed—to reduce the significance of that stop, must remain largely untold. But I do want to share with you, to the extent possible, the AJC's role in these momentous events.

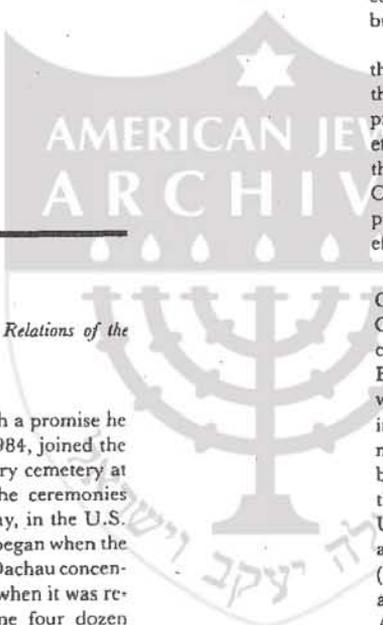
Our earliest efforts, both public and private, concentrated on education and interpretation. As the only American Jewish organization that has been engaged in fruitful dialogue and educational programs with West Germany for years, we were in a unique position to explain—in dozens of newspaper stories and on countless radio and television programs in the days that followed—why the Bitburg visit was not an acceptable signal of reconciliation.

Our emphasis on the importance of remembering the horrors committed by the Nazis, even as we extended the hand of friendship to the democratic Germany that has grown out of the ashes of World War II, found echoes in the statements of prestigious Americans in every walk of life. Indeed, many religious, black and ethnic leaders with whom we have worked closely over the years called to ask how they could help make the issues clear to the President and to America as a whole. Our Washington office was inundated by calls from political leaders and other public figures, and similar calls also came in to our area offices. Seldom have our efforts to rally public support been more enthusiastically received.

As early as April 12, the General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, the Executive Secretary for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the pastor of one of America's leading black congregations had categorically condemned the plans for the Presidential visit to Bitburg. In the days that followed, other Christian leaders, representing the widest possible religious and political spectrum, spoke out with equal clarity, both in individual statements and in newspaper ads in *The New York Times*, and other major papers across the country. The same gratifying response came from the black and ethnic communities. A letter to President Reagan urging him to cancel the Bitburg visit was signed by the heads of organizations representing Polish, Ukrainian, Hispanic, Italian, Hellenic, Chinese and Japanese Americans, as well as the head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); and statements and newspaper ads featuring these and other ethnic and black leaders appeared in Chicago, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Seattle, and other cities.

Because the AJC's Annual Meeting took place during the weekend of the President's Bitburg visit, and because one of the featured speakers of our meeting was Dr. Alois Mertes, Minister of State in West Germany's Foreign Office, the AJC's views got even wider coverage than they might have received otherwise. Dr. Mertes' speech was heavily covered by the media; there was an impromptu press conference with him immediately afterwards.

In addition to these broad-based programs of clarification and consciousness-raising, there was another element of our involvement in the Bitburg affair which has not been publicized until now.



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Dr. Billy Graham first telephoned me from his home in Montreal, North Carolina, on Friday morning, April 19th. He told me that he had just spoken to President Reagan and to Nancy Reagan, and they were deeply upset over the furor unleashed in response to that news. Graham said that he had told the Reagans that he thought it was a mistake for the President to have acceded to Kohl's request to honor the SS soldiers, among the other German soldiers. He said he was concerned over this tragic episode's contributing to the undermining of the President's moral authority.

I told him that I shared his concerns. He then asked me if I might be able to help relieve this crisis in some way (as I had tried to help him in the past during his missions to the Soviet Union and other East European countries). I said that, of course, I was prepared to help. He then said he would speak again with the President and Nancy to offer my help, and he would call me back.

The next morning Graham called me at my home and informed me that he had spoken with the President and Nancy. He said they were both grateful for my offer to be of help, and they asked if I would talk with Michael Deaver, who was organizing the President's visit. I said I would. Ten minutes later, Deaver called me and we talked for nearly an hour. I told him that the AJC and I personally believed the proposed visit to the Bitburg cemetery was a "major mistake," that it ought to be dropped. Deaver said that they would like to do that, but that he had spoken with Kohl last week in Germany, and Kohl was very emotional and adamant. I then said that I thought the trip had to be fundamentally reconceptualized. If the intention was to dramatize reconciliation, the place to do that was at the gravesite of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, the architect of modern German democracy and a foe of Nazi tyranny and totalitarianism. He said the Adenauer idea was floating around, but now maybe they ought to consider making a decision about including that. He wanted to know why Adenauer was important, and I spelled out his record, including his role in establishing German-U.S. reconciliation, Franco-German reconciliation, Germany's entry into the European community, Adenauer's establishing a special relationship with Israel and the Jewish people.

Deaver said he had not been aware of "all that," but that information was certainly persuasive for including a visit to Adenauer's grave. We then discussed plans for the Bergen-Belsen visit and talk, and also the visit to the Bitburg U.S. military base and what the President might say there.

We also discussed the idea of possibly including a visit to the Remagen Bridge as a symbol of German-American reconciliation.

During the week of April 22, Billy Graham and Michael Deaver and I spoke a half-dozen times. On Friday, April 26, Deaver suggested that it might be useful if we met at the White House on the following Monday, the eve of his departure for Bonn. The President was scheduled to leave the next day for the European summit.

A meeting was set in the White House on Monday, April 29, at 11 a.m.

Our delegation was headed by President Howard Friedman, and included David Gordis, Bill Trosten, Hy Bookbinder and myself. Howard and Bill reported on their trip to Bonn, their meetings with Dr. Alois Mertes, Wolf Calibau, and Chancellor Kohl's representatives. They reported on the fact that Dr. Mertes said that the Bitburg cemetery visit could not be changed, but that the schedule could be changed to provide opportunities for emphasizing democracy and anti-Nazi commitments of modern Germany as the basis for reconciliation. They reported that Chancellor Kohl had agreed to these reformulations based on the memorandum that Dr. Mertes had drafted in the presence of Howard and Bill and had sent by messenger to Kohl.

Deaver expressed appreciation for that helpfulness which he said made it easier for him now to make adjustments in the President's schedule. He said he would go to Bonn and try to work in the Adenauer visit, probably as an unannounced surprise. He assured us that in light of our earlier conversations, the President had agreed to a plan to reduce the visit to the Bitburg cemetery to a minimum, "perfunctory ceremony," with General Ridgeway and anti-Nazi General von Stauffenberg laying the wreath. The President would make no statement at the cemetery in order to minimize its importance.

We said it was important to emphasize certain themes in the President's scheduled speeches. Among them, the repudiation of the SS's horrendous crimes against the Jews and others. At that point, Deaver called in the President's speech writer, Mr. Kachigian, and we made a number of points about Adenauer, Democracy, totalitarianism, the importance of remembering the horrors of the Holocaust and rejecting denial and evasion. The speech-writer took detailed notes of our conversation. As it turned out, almost all the themes we proposed were incorporated in the President's speeches at Bergen-Belsen and at the U.S. military base in Bitburg. They also included the visit to Adenauer's grave.

At Deaver's request, I sent him by diplomatic pouch through the White House the next day a proposed text for the President on the moral and political legacy of Adenauer for modern Germany. The President visited the grave but apparently made no statement, although a brief background statement was issued to the press in Germany on the importance of the Adenauer visit along the lines that we suggested.

Deaver expressed gratitude for our helpfulness both in the U.S. and through the German visit.

He then walked out of the room and returned with President Reagan and Donald Regan, White House Chief of Staff. The President thanked us for our cooperation which he said he deeply appreciated. He then said that he was appalled by the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust and wanted us to understand how he felt. He then tried out on us a line about how the dead, all the dead, in the Bitburg cemetery were being judged by the Supreme Judge. We were tempted to respond but did not because it would have



meant a long metaphysical polemic. We decided to leave well enough alone.

Donald Regan and Deaver again thanked us. As we left, Deaver said he would be glad to meet with us when the President returned from Germany. We wrote to the President, expressing our views, and asking for a meeting with him as soon as he returned.

Howard and David discussed our work with the White House with Max Fisher who was grateful for our helpfulness. He said he would arrange a meeting for all of us with the President on his return. Billy Graham called me on Monday, May 6, to say that the President and Nancy were deeply appreciative of our constructive efforts.

I alluded earlier to our long-standing relationships with the West German Government. One of the principal architects of that relationship, both with the present government and its Social Democratic predecessor, is AJC's Associate Director, William Trosten. On April 24, Bill Trosten and Howard Friedman flew over to Bonn to meet with Alois Mertes and others close to him. There, too, we urged, most strongly, cancellation of the Bitburg visit; but we also stressed that regardless of that decision it was essential to add symbols that would underscore the new Germany's rejection of Nazi totalitarianism and commitment to democratic values and human rights. Konrad Adenauer, we pointed out, was the first postwar leader of a democratic Germany, and a visit to his gravesite might be one such symbol. A ceremony at the Remagen Bridge, with American and German troops meeting where Americans and Germans had killed one another 40 years earlier, might be another way to stress reconciliation. We also urged that both Chancellor Kohl and President Reagan underscore, at their visit to the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen, that the Holocaust must be a lesson for the ages for all who cherish human liberty. Before we left Dr. Mertes' office, he dictated a letter to the Chancellor repeating and endorsing our recommendations. And before we left Germany for the States we got word that our suggestions had been well received by the Chancellor himself.

This, in essence, summarizes our Bitburg-related activities. We did not succeed in convincing Bonn or Washington to cancel the ceremony at Bitburg (the President and the Chancellor did go to the Adenauer gravesite). But I am convinced we played an important role in helping to contain the damage, and in setting the stage for the ongoing process of education, here and in Germany, that must be pursued.

Paradoxically, there has been some positive fallout from this event. The entire world has been reminded of the unremitting Jewish anguish over the Holocaust; and we have seen a heightened recognition that the lessons of that horror are universal. This education-in-depth is certainly welcome. The rallying of our friends, Christians, blacks, ethnics; the unprecedented resolution adopted by the U.S. Senate (see Chapter 2) and the unequivocal letter signed by a majority of the House of Representatives (see Chapter 2); the outpouring of statements and letters challenging the most important leader of the world's most important nation on a moral issue of such importance to us are also important pluses. And the sensitization of the Administration, the Federal Republic and of the media will, I think, stand us in good stead in the future.

Does Incessant Recollection of Nazi Past Denigrate Germany of Today?

May 4, 1985

*Dr. Alois Mertes, Minister of State
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5300 Bonn
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Dear Dr. Mertes:

Since the beginning of the agitation around Reagan's visit to Bitburg I have thought several times of writing to you, but could not find the time during the busy last weeks of the semester. Now that the semester is over, I shall set forth my thoughts as they occur to me without attempting to arrange them in any order. I shall be utterly candid, not shrinking from expressing my thoughts and feelings even when I know that they diverge sharply from yours.

There is no objective ground for a major conflict of interest between the loose entity called "World Jewry" and Germany. Jews, for all their feelings towards Germany, have no interest in harming her. For example, unlike other nations that dread the very thought of German reunification, Jews qua Jews should have no rational interest in opposing the reunion of Germany under a democratic dispensation.

In dwelling on the Holocaust, in having contributed to its becoming a prominent theme of contemporary culture, the organized Jewish world has been moved by a number of impulses and considerations from which the intention of causing any harm to contemporary Germany is entirely absent.

Before Bitburg the sense of conflict derived from a misapprehension. German politicians and those concerned with promoting the reputation of The Federal Republic abroad hold it as an axiomatic truth that the incessant recollection of the Nazi past denigrates Germany of today and produces ill will towards it. It is my impression that this belief is false. For the American public, and especially the educated part of it, has learned to regard present-day Germany as a world which has increasingly and radically departed from the Third Reich. It is even probable that within the University the study of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust has a therapeutic effect diminishing anti-German stereotypes. I speak from my experience as a teacher of literally thousands of students. I have not taken a scientific poll among my students; but a few days ago I asked my class on the Holocaust at Harvard (170 students) how the course affected their feelings towards Germany. Students who confessed to having had anti-German prejudices said that by the end of the course these prejudices were diluted or dissolved.

The present dispute disclosed the clashing contrast between the conception of Nazism dominant in the Western World and the conception common in Ger-