

# I'm Not Sure What George Bush Has To Do with Hitler

by Alexis Pogorelskin

**T**he *New York Review of Books* recently included an essay on a new biography of Sergei Kovalyov who, with great courage and dignity as well as immense personal sacrifice, has condemned the abuses of power and arbitrary conduct of each regime that has ruled Russia in his lifetime. Kovalyov's partner in the cause was Andrei Sakharov.<sup>1</sup> I had the privilege of laying flowers at Sakharov's grave a few months after his death. I walked through the Russian forest still covered in snow, the tributes so numerous that wreaths sheltered the path for almost a quarter mile to the gravesite. Russians knew whom they had lost.

I turned the page of the review, brought back to the present by a notice announcing a forthcoming issue of *Thought and Action* with the theme "public higher education in the national security state."<sup>2</sup> Did the editors place the ad next to the essay on Kovalyov for effect, with a sense of irony perhaps, or by accident? No matter. Standing alone, the ad would be painful enough: "... in the rush to defend the nation against enemies real and imagined... there has been a serious curtailment of rights... is academic freedom threatened..."<sup>3</sup>

I have my own answer. I believe that in addition to the threat of a new governmental "approach to civil liberties,"<sup>4</sup> we also face a more direct threat within the classroom. An attitude has arisen among students that is antithetical to the free

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and open spirit of the university. That attitude, as I found, can encourage conduct far more potent in stifling the free exchange of ideas than any official policy.

#### A PASSING REMARK

I chair the History Department at the University of Minnesota–Duluth (UMD). This past semester, I taught History of the Holocaust and 20th Century Russia. Parallels between the past and present abounded. I restrained myself from making

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them, lest I offend some students, but also from an instinctual sense that trouble lurked in the connections that I so readily perceived.

By late October, I could no longer suppress one of these associations. In class, I pointed out, as an aside, that President Bush made no mention in the 2000 campaign about the determination that he and his closest advisors harbored to invade Iraq. By the same token, Hitler's campaign for the presidency in March 1932 did not include mention of the aggression that he intended. Hitler had secured his base with *Mein Kampf*, published in 1925. But he campaigned as a moderate in the early 1930s.

Within days of my remark, the *New York Times* published an editorial about the Defense Department's skewing of intelligence to encourage the Iraq war.<sup>5</sup> The *Times* noted that "Mr. Rumsfeld...had been advocating an invasion of Iraq long before Mr. Bush took office."<sup>6</sup> I posted the editorial next to my office door, along with other pieces from the *Times* critical of Bush and his policies. I also included Garrison Keillor's recent essay on the corruption of conduct and civility within the Republican Party. Confirmation of Keillor's lament came swiftly.

What followed for the next week or so, in the days before the 2004 presidential election, was unique to my teaching career. If I have ever aroused such ire in my students, I am unaware of it. It began when a student in my Holocaust class, "R," sent me an e-mail insisting that my passing remark comparing Bush's deceptive campaign in 2000 to Hitler's in 1932 confirmed a conviction that I had never expressed. "R" wrote:<sup>7</sup>

i'm not sure what george bush has to do with hitler. i understand you probably

have a hatred for him like most professors at umd, but i think it was an unfair comment...using george bush, iraq and hitler in a similar context was a little over the top...

Because "R" had made a D+ on the last exam, I wondered if he was angrier about his grade than my comment and if the former fueled the latter. I responded to "R" by admitting my dilemma about commenting at all on current issues.<sup>8</sup>

I find myself in a difficult position. I find numerous ways in which Bush

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reminds me of Hitler...Do I keep silent for fear of giving offense and turning some students off or do I speak out about evil as I see it...You can expect my candor.

I then urged him to see me to discuss the matter further. He never did. Instead, he launched a campaign against me, using the UMD College Republican e-mail distribution list. Attack messages were sent to me, some of which baited me to reply. Had I done so, I would have fueled the far more revealing and intriguing discussion about which I was not supposed to be privy. I learned about this discussion because one of my former students supplied me with the e-mails on which I base this essay. Here is how "R" launched the vendetta.<sup>9</sup> He warned his "fellow republicans" of "the kind of garbage that professors are telling the weak minded and uninformed people in this school." Naming me, he recounted how "in a lecture on hitler and the holocaust," I had "COMPARED characteristics of Bush and adolf hitler in how [Bush] lied about war....This is her unbelievable, but predictable response," which I included above.

A barrage of hostile e-mails began to light up my computer screen. They came two and three at a time. On the listserv, students spoke of intimidating me or, barring that, at least shaming and embarrassing me. Violence wafted through the discussion and hung like smoke in the air.

Here is what one student who had never taken a class from me wrote from a campus in Wisconsin.<sup>10</sup> "I have heard about your IN CLASS comparison of hitler to the president of our country." She was glad "that Americans can make

such...comments without being shamed or tortured,” yet added, “I hope you hear a lot more about this issue, because it’s a big one.” She informed me that my job “is to shut up and teach...If I was [sic.] you, I would...issue a public apology...and be truly humiliated.”

Closer to home, another student urged me to resign my position and leave.<sup>11</sup> “If...you would openly compare...our President...to one of the most ruthless killers in the history of mankind then I would suggest taking the next flight out of here.”

A student in my Soviet history class, “S,” offered an interpretation of my com-

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ment that was sure to rouse the faithful. He began with the reassurance that “I was and am fascinated by your classes,” then moved in for the kill:<sup>12</sup>

By comparing our President to a man who was possibly the greatest evil of the last century, it seems that you likewise incriminated his supporters as either ignorant followers or some kind of Nazi sympathizers themselves.

If that leap was not bad enough, “S” had still more insights for his fellow Republicans. He explained in a message that I was not supposed to see that the root of my evil lay in my early training as a Vietnam War protester:<sup>13</sup>

These people grew up protesting the Vienam [sic.] war and they know nothing but dissenting against tradition and power...just read the trash posted outside her office door.

Having denounced the heritage of protest that nurtured me, “S” urged his *confrères* to fight my “indoctrination” by “protesting to some campus student rights organization.”

Fortunately, not all students were this hostile. One student wrote me “to apologize for the strong-arm tactics that many of the College Republicans are employing.”<sup>14</sup> He assured me “there still are Republicans that believe...in civil liberties.” Another informed the alias that my “exams are all graded based on fact. You don’t need to agree with her to pass her class with an ‘A’.”<sup>15</sup>

These comments defending me appalled one of the club officers who replied to my defender:<sup>16</sup>

This professor IS forcing her opinions on her students by even mentioning

them in class...What if one of the students in her class is a Jew?...she basically made the reference that his supporters are Nazis.

The castigators among the Young Republicans broke down into two groups. Those who were merely abusive and those like the club officer who argued that my position of authority would sway the “weak minded,” “uninformed,” and “uneducated,” including those who, like the professor, are Jewish. Altogether these messages provided a bleak picture of the Young Republicans on my campus. In their

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view, I was to shut up and teach—just the facts. Students were not to be tempted to think.

What effect did all this have on my conduct in the classroom? Knowing that many in my classes were probably silent witnesses to the campaign, I took advantage of these teachable moments. For example, I explained the Soviet term “*stukach*” (informer) and the contempt in which such people were held for reporting on fellow students and on what professors said in class. I could see “S” wince as I offered the example of those who aspired to upward mobility in the ranks of the secret police, reporting on others and denouncing them behind their back.

The Holocaust class provided different opportunities. There, I felt almost as though I were the pupil as much as the teacher. The campaign waged against me taught me what I had not known before. In discussion of Bernhard Schlink’s novel *The Reader*, I emphasize the theme of indifference as an explanation for the protagonist’s behavior. I now went beyond that concept and asked the class what motivates indifference, why do people look away, fail to intervene, or ignore the obvious. The class was quick to respond, “intimidation and fear.” Yes, I added, a campaign, a vendetta, gets launched, and one is supposed to fall silent. A glance at “R” led me to believe that he had missed the point entirely.

What did I learn from this brief, but painful episode? Certainly, I became more aware of my own naiveté. I could now ask, “Do we ever really know whom we teach?” In their ardor to defend George W. Bush, some were willing to join a

howling electronic mob. Would they burn my publications next? The anti-intellectualism that motivated some of them appalled me.

As “S” wrote to the list, “academe is largely corrupt, just because they are learned does not make them right.”<sup>17</sup> Nor, I might add, wrong. My passing comment had become “continuous references to the similarities between Bush and Hitler”<sup>18</sup> and students concluded that I labeled Bush supporters Nazis. Politics had given way to ideology, and patriotism had become a rigid unquestioning defense

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of policies that would find their first victims among the student population itself and their generational cohort.

I had assumed that I could conduct a dialogue with my class and lead them on the same intellectual journey that I travel. Instead, I encountered anger because I, like others of my generation, practice dissent against tradition and power. One of the officers of the College Republicans admonished a student who defended me to withdraw from the discussion: “I would appreciate it if you would not e-mail...students again. If you have a comment to make, please direct it to one of our officers.”<sup>19</sup> Dissent within the organization elicits as much tolerance as within the classroom. These students who would quash dissent represent more than a threat to the university. They undermine the very foundation of our democracy.

George Bush’s re-election terminated the vendetta, putting an end to the threat posed by my ability to corrupt the young. But the possibility of such orchestrated attacks remains.

That point leads me to the role of technology in what occurred. Technology ran amok to undermine my authority, even instill ignorance and distortion. Classroom discussions were hijacked and a shadow class emerged to corrupt the integrity of the course. One message in particular summed up the process:<sup>20</sup> “hey all I was wondering if we were going to do anything about the comments that Dr. Pogorelskin made I would...like to get involved...”

In the national security state, liberal professors are to be intimidated into silence. We will not have to travel to distant graves of foreign dissidents to lay

flowers. The current administration and its young defenders would have us bury our convictions here at home. 

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Aryeh Neier, "Hero" review of *Defending Human Rights in Russia: Sergei Kovalyov, Dissident and Human Rights Commissioner, 1969-2003*, by Emma Gilligan, *New York Review of Books* LII (January 13, 2004): 30-33.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., "A Call For Papers," 32.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> "How to Skew Intelligence," *New York Times*, 23 Oct. 2004 (unsigned editorial).
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Name and e-mail address deleted, no subject indicated, 20 Oct. 2004, personal e-mail (20 Oct. 2004).
- <sup>8</sup> E-mail sent on 21 Oct. 2004.
- <sup>9</sup> E-mail forwarded to me on 1 Nov. 2004, originally sent on 21 Oct. 2004 to umd\_college\_republicans@d.umn.edu and entitled, "this is unbelievable."
- <sup>10</sup> Name and e-mail address deleted, no subject indicated, 22 Oct. 2004, personal e-mail (22 Oct. 2004).
- <sup>11</sup> Name and e-mail address deleted, no subject, 27 Oct. 2004, personal e-mail (27 Oct. 2004).
- <sup>12</sup> Name and e-mail address deleted, no subject, 25 Oct. 2004, personal e-mail (25 Oct. 2004).
- <sup>13</sup> E-mail forwarded to me on 1 Nov. 2004, originally sent on 21 Oct. 2004 and entitled, "Time to get better organized?"
- <sup>14</sup> Name and e-mail address deleted, no subject, 27 Oct. 2004, personal e-mail (27 Oct. 2004).
- <sup>15</sup> E-mail forwarded to me on 1 Nov. 2004, name and address deleted, originally sent on 22 Oct. 2004 and entitled, "Re: Prof Pogorelskin."
- <sup>16</sup> E-mail forwarded to me on 1 Nov. 2004, name and address deleted, originally sent on 31 Oct. 2004 and entitled, "Dr. Pogorelskin."
- <sup>17</sup> E-mail forwarded to me on 1 Nov. 2004, originally sent on 21 Oct. 2004 and entitled, "Time to get better organized?"
- <sup>18</sup> Name and e-mail address deleted, no subject, 27 Oct. 2004, personal e-mail (27 Oct. 2004).
- <sup>19</sup> E-mail forwarded to me on 1 Nov. 2004, name and e-mail address deleted, originally sent on 31 Oct. 2004 and entitled, "Dr. Pogorelskin."
- <sup>20</sup> E-mail forwarded to me on 1 Nov. 2004, name and e-mail address deleted, originally sent on 22 Oct. 2004 and entitled, "prof."