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Bush's imperial historian.

White Man for the Job

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Last month, a little-known British historian named Andrew Roberts was swept into the White House for a three-hour-long hug. He lunched with George W. Bush and Dick Cheney, huddled alone with the president in the Oval Office, and was rapturously lauded by him as "great." Roberts was so fawned over that his wife, Susan Gilchrist, told the London *Observer*, "I thought I had a crush on him, but it's nothing like the crush President Bush has on him."

At first glance, this isn't surprising. Roberts's latest work--*A History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900*--sounds like a standard-issue neocon narrative. As a sequel to Winston Churchill's famous series, it purports to tell the story of how the "Anglosphere" (Great Britain, the United States, Australia, and friends) saved the world from a slew of totalitarian menaces, from the kaiser to the caliphate. It presents Bush as the logical successor to Churchill--only Bush is, of course, even better.

Yet, beyond this surface sycophancy, there is something darker and more fetid. Bush, Cheney, and--in a recent, glowing cover story--*National Review*, have, in fact, embraced a man with links to white supremacy, whose book is not a history but an ahistorical catalogue of apologies



and justifications for mass murder that even blames the victims of concentration camps for their own deaths. The decision to laud Roberts provides a bleak insight into the thinking of the Bush White House as his presidential clock nears midnight.

Andrew Roberts describes himself as "extremely right wing" and "a reactionary," and, in Great Britain, the 44-year-old has long been regarded as a caricature of a caricature of the old imperial historians. He famously lauds the British Empire--and its massacres and suppressions--as "glorious" on every occasion. He sucks up to the English aristocracy to the point that *Tatler*, the society journal, says, "[H]is adolescent crush on the upper classes is matched by virtually no one else in this country." One of the few things that can silence Roberts is a mention of his origins in the distinctly nonaristocratic merchant classes, with a father who owned a string of Kentucky Fried Chicken franchises. Much as he longs to be K&C (Kensington and Chelsea), to those he adores, he will always have the whiff of KFC.

Yet this Evelyn Waugh tomfoolery masks an agenda that the distinguished Harvard historian Caroline Elkins describes as "incredibly dangerous and frightening." To understand the core of Roberts's philosophy--from Waugh to war--it's necessary to look at a small, sinister group of British-based South African and Zimbabwean exiles he has embraced.

In 2001, Roberts spoke to a dinner of the Springbok Club, a group that regards itself as a shadow white government of South Africa and calls for "the re-establishment of civilized European rule throughout the African continent." Founded by a former member of the neo-fascist National Front, the club flies the flag of apartheid South Africa at every meeting. The dinner was a celebration of the thirty-sixth anniversary of the day the white supremacist government of Rhodesia announced a Unilateral Declaration of Independence from Great Britain, which was pressing it to enfranchise black people. Surrounded by nostalgists for this racist rule, Roberts, according to the club's website, "finished his speech by proposing a toast to the Springbok Club, which he said he considered the heir to previous imperial achievements."

The British High Commission in South Africa has accused the club of spreading "hate literature." Yet Roberts's fondness for the Springbok Club is not an anomaly; it is perfectly logical to anybody who has read his writing, which consists of elaborate and historically discredited defenses for the actions of a white supremacist empire--the

British--and a plea to the United States to continue its work.

Roberts advises Bush to embrace the idea of the United States as a civilizing empire ruling the world: the white man's burden in the White House. Pigmentation--the old basis for dominance--is now discredited, so he has politely switched to linguistics. The Americans must pick up where the British left off: "Just as we do not today differentiate between the Roman Republic and the imperial period of the Julio-Claudians when we think of the Roman Empire, so in the future no one will bother to make a distinction between the British Empire-led and the American Republic-led periods of English-speaking dominance."

How should this American Empire exercise its power? One useful tactic, Roberts believes, is massacring civilians. The Amritsar massacre is one of the ugliest episodes in the history of the British Raj. In 1919, British Brigadier General Reginald Dyer opened fire on 10,000 unarmed men, women, and children who were peacefully protesting, and around 400 died. Dyer was even repudiated by the British government. As Patrick French, an award-winning historian of the period, explains: "The biographies of Dyer show that he was clearly mentally abnormal, and there was no way he should have been in charge of troops."

Yet Dyer has, at last, found a defender--Andrew Roberts. After the massacre, Roberts notes, "[I]t was not necessary for another shot to be fired throughout the entire region". He later comments: "Today's reactions to Dyer's deed are of course uniformly damning ... but if the Amritsar district, Punjab region or southern India generally had carried on in revolt, many more than 379 people would have lost their lives."

This is a recurring theme in Roberts's work, with obvious appeal to Bush: that nationalist sentiments can be successfully crushed with massive violence. He claimed, in a speech to the Heritage Foundation in February, that "when you see Arab nationalism today, ... that simply would not have happened had there been British troops [remaining] in the [Suez] canal zone." He even argues that German nationalism would not have re-emerged following World War I if only Germany had been more humiliated.

But French and dozens of other historians have shown that, far from successfully suppressing nationalist sentiments, the Amritsar massacre inflamed them. Figures in the Indian National Congress like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru--men who had been constitutionalists with some residual loyalty to the Empire--abandoned their

position following Amritsar, reasoning that, if the British were going to gun down women and children, there was no point in taking the reformist route.

Much of Roberts's advice to Bush is based on similarly skewed and surreal misreadings of history. For example, he has advised Bush to adopt "the whole idea of mass internment," saying: "I think it is the way the administration of Iraq should go." At his lunch with Bush, according to economist Irwin Stelzer, who was present, Roberts cited Ireland as a place where internment worked.

Every major historian of Ireland--across the political spectrum--says the opposite is the case. When internment was introduced in Northern Ireland in 1971, violence vastly increased--and it only fell when it was abolished. The decision by the British to grab Catholics on the flimsiest evidence and hold them without trial is universally regarded as the greatest recruiting gift the Irish Republican Army was ever handed. "Roberts has no track record as a historian of Ireland," says Brendan O'Leary of the University of Pennsylvania, an expert on both Ireland and counterinsurgency techniques. "If he did, he would know that there is a total historical consensus that internment was a catastrophe."

Roberts is even supportive of politicians who take mass internment to its most extreme conclusion--concentration camps. His political hero is Lord Salisbury, the British prime minister who, during the Boer War, constructed concentration camps in South Africa that, a generation later, inspired Hermann Goering. Under Salisbury, the British burned Boer civilians out of their homes and farms and drove them into concentration camps. The result was that about 34,000 people--some 15 percent of the entire Boer population--died in the camps, mainly of disease and starvation.

Roberts presents a very different picture for Bush. Drawing obvious parallels with Iraq, he says the British introduced "regime change" in Pretoria out of a concern "for human rights." They bravely fought on against an insurgency campaign that led many weak-willed liberals back home to believe the war was lost, until victory was finally achieved. (It wouldn't be surprising to see him claim the Boers had a stash of WMD.)

In his most radical piece of revisionism, Roberts argues that, far from being a "war crime," the concentration camps "were set up for the Boers' protection." Mike Davis of the University of California, Irvine, author of *Late Victorian Holocausts*, says bluntly: "This is tantamount to Holocaust-denial. His arguments about the Boer concentration camps are similar to the arguments of the Nazi apologists about those

camps."

Yet Roberts's denialism extends to an even greater crime by the British Empire: the creation and perpetuation of famines that killed millions. In the 1870s, under British rule, India was reduced to a state of extreme famine. One dissident British civil servant, Lieutenant-Colonel Ronald Osborne, described staggering through the horror: "Mothers sold their children for a single scanty meal. Husbands flung their wives into ponds, to escape the torment of seeing them perish by the lingering agonies of hunger."

Roberts presents this string of famines as a natural disaster, which the British dealt with through "fairness and decency and astonishingly little interest in personal gain." He also explicitly praises the British viceroys who adopted the policies that worsened the starvation. In his biography of Lord Salisbury, he praises Viceroy Lord Lytton for "his excellent management of the famine"--think of it as "Heckuva job, Brownie," a hundred years too soon.

Yet the research of Nobel Prizewinning economist Amartya Sen shows that the famines in the Raj were a direct--if unintended--result of British rule: "The best response to people like Roberts is to show that India continued to have famines right up to the time of independence in 1947," Sen explained to me. "But, since the British left, there ... has been no substantial famine."

Roberts's raw imperialism informs the advice he offers Bush today. For one, he urges Bush to adopt a supreme imperial indifference to public opinion. He counsels that "there can be no greater test of statesmanship than sticking to unpopular but correct policies." The real threat isn't abroad, but at home, among domestic critics. Roberts writes, "The greatest danger to [the British and, by extension, the American] continued imperium came not from declared enemies without, but rather from vociferous enemies within their own society."

In this Bushian history, democratic debate--especially in wartime--is a sign of weakness to be suppressed. "Contrary to the received view of the Vietnam War, the United States was never defeated in the field of battle," he writes. It was Walter Cronkite, not Ho Chi Minh, who was the true menace: "Some of the media was indeed a prime enemy of the conflict." Self-criticism is only ever interpreted in these histories as "self-hatred," which he says is "an abiding defect in the English-speaking peoples,

and for some reason especially strong in Americans." It can only sap the "willpower" of any empire.

It doesn't appear to occur to Roberts that the British or U.S. empires could simply hit up against a limit to their power. Could there be a worse adviser for George W. Bush right now? Roberts's advice is a vicious imperial anachronism: Target civilians, introduce mass internment, don't worry about whether people hate you, bear down on dissent because it will sap the empire's willpower, ignore your critics because they're just jealous, and--above all--keep on fighting and you'll prevail.

It seems that Bush looks to historians as he looks to his advisers: to be told he's doing just fine. But to hear that message, he's had to scrape around for a fifth-rate Rudyard Kipling mocked by almost all serious historians and soaked in slaughter.

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