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PATRICK BUCHANAN

Wallowing in a dead regime's atrocities

Ironic, is it not? The United States, which gave thousands of its sons to help free France from the grip of Adolf Hitler, finds itself apologizing to the French nation, many of whose citizens actively collaborated with Hitler.

On hearing that the State Department had sent America's "deep regrets" to France — for our having employed and sheltered Klaus Barbie, the wartime "Butcher of Lyon" — one is reminded of the insight of Malcolm Muggeridge: Men are never more passionate or eloquent than when denouncing the sins of a previous generation.

The U.S. official who urged the formal expression of regret is Allen A. Ryan Jr. Until recently, Ryan was chief of the Justice Department office which specializes in running down and deporting — before their Maker can get to them — 65- and 75-year-old Central European immigrants who permitted or perpetrated atrocities in a war that ended some 40 years ago.

In Ryan's verdict, here is America's offense:

"... officers of the United States government were directly responsible for protecting a person wanted by the government of France on criminal charges and in arranging his escape from the law." This episode, cannot "be considered as merely the unfortunate action of renegade officers... the United States government cannot disclaim responsibility for their actions." What the men of the Army Counterintelligence Corps did, in refusing to deliver up Barbie to the French in 1950, says Ryan, was "indefensible."

Strong words. Yet, it is probably a good deal easier to be dogmatic and judgmental in memos tapped out in an air-conditioned office at the Department of Justice in 1983, than it was for those U.S. officers faced with their painful personal and ethical dilemma in 1950 and '51.

Recall, if you will, the situation the United States faced in West Europe. In 1947, the great U.S. Army had been demobilized; Stalin's divisions, at full battle strength, were just over the border.

Ahead lay the coup in Czechoslovakia, the Berlin blockade, the airlift, possible communist political takeovers in France and Italy. And perhaps war with the Soviet Union.

Into Army hands falls an ex-Nazi, a Gestapo type, who can offer valuable intelligence on Soviet activities in the American zone, and on communist penetration of the French secret service. Unknown to these officers, the ex-Nazi is a Grade A war criminal.

When the Americans, in 1949, learn who Barbie is, and the French demand that he be turned over, the officers confront their dilemma. They can deliver up their agent who has spied faithfully, and, after the French get through "interrogating" him, expose the fact that French intelligence has been a target of American spying. Or they can deny they have Barbie, dissemble to their superiors, and get Barbie a one-way ticket on the "rat line" to Bolivia. The latter course would permit a war criminal to escape justice; it might also advance American and allied interests by preventing a blowup that could only benefit Joseph Stalin.

Perhaps the officers made the wrong decision. Was it "indefensible?"

Surely, anti-Americans will find in the episode further proof of the affinity they long ago detected between the U.S. military and fascist police types. And those Americans who relish beating their breast and apologizing for U.S. behavior will have new reason to do so. But, again, to Muggeridge's observation:

Given that Barbie is a particularly revolting Nazi specimen who deserves the death penalty for his maltreatment of French prisoners, his deportation of French Jews, why are we so pre-occupied with the atrocities of four decades ago, yet so indifferent to the identical crimes of today?

In 1972, when Nixon made his "historic journey" to China, he had to shake the hand of perhaps the greatest tyrant in human history, Mao Tse-tung. Mao's revolutionary

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