

American Goebbels or Endless Kristolnacht

Written by

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The Nation - Eric Alterman - Join me, dear reader, in yet another inquiry into the role in American political life of William Kristol. My goal is not merely to point out, yet again, his miserable record of prognostication relating to the invasion of Iraq. That's now a given. And in fact, while Kristol has been spectacularly wrong, he has not been the wrongest of the top two Weekly Standard editors. That honor would have to go to executive editor Fred Barnes, who, oblivious to what almost all Americans and (finally) most pundits now know, continues to portray George W. Bush as a heroic figure and successful President.

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Kristolizing the (Neoconservative) Moment

The liberal media by Eric Alterman

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But while Barnes is a bad joke to most, his colleague Kristol continues to add to his panoply of powerful pundit positions. Not only is he EiC of The Weekly Standard, a semi-regular columnist for the Washington Post, a Fox News analyst and a frequent face on Jon Stewart's The Daily Show; he is also a regular columnist for Time. By any measure he remains, as Bernard-Henri L?vy once deemed him, America's "archetype of the neoconservative." What this means in Kristol's case is that what may look like journalism to the naked eye, and is passed along as such by his editors and producers, is really something quite different.

Make no mistake: Bill Kristol is an extremely smart fellow with good manners and a likable demeanor. Because he is so smart, it's all but impossible to believe that he believes many of the things he says and writes. But if one looks for a consistent pattern to Kristol's perpetual wrongness, it's not hard to discern. For Kristol is less interested in being correct than in advancing his side's interests. He's not a journalist; he's an apparatchik working undercover as a man of the press.

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Back in 1993, when Kristol admitted to just being a Republican strategist, he made a name for himself by writing a strategy memo in which he altered the course of American politics by convincing Republicans not to compromise with the Clinton Administration healthcare plan but to destroy it. "Any Republican urge to negotiate a 'least bad' compromise with the Democrats, and thereby gain momentary public credit for helping the president 'do something,'" he wrote, "if it can be beaten, it unravels other things. We have to beat the Clinton plan period, no ifs, ands or buts."

Note that he ignores not only the problems of tens of millions of uninsured Americans but also the merits of the plan itself. The issue was power, pure and simple. If you're seeking to locate the moment in which the era of right-wing Republican recalcitrance--which ended so badly for the party in the 2006 elections--was, um, crystallized, this memo gets my nomination.

OK fine, you say. He was not yet a journalist. And while his Manichean machinations on behalf of the Republican Party may strike one as morally questionable, they cannot be held against his journalism. That may be true, but I would argue that Kristol has changed hats, not stripes. How else to explain that nearly every time a major issue confronts the nation, his analysis is not merely wrong but spectacularly so, and always in the same direction, regardless of evidence or expertise. Observe:

* In the opening moments of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, Kristol insisted, "We are now in the final days." He intoned, "If the President lied to the American People...he's finished."

* When the Starr report was issued, causing almost universal revulsion among Americans, Kristol wrote a cover editorial for his magazine that headlined the report Starr's Home Run, portraying its author as Mark McGwire and calling for Clinton's immediate impeachment.

* At the outset of the Iraq War, Kristol called predictors of Shiite-Sunni strife purveyors of "pop sociology," insisting, "Iraq's always been very secular" and that a US invasion would spread "the principles of liberty and justice in the Islamic world."

When it comes to liberals and Democrats, Kristol is constantly insinuating disloyalty. "What drives so many Democrats crazy about [Joe] Lieberman," he says, is that "he's unashamedly pro-American." Why did Ted Kennedy, Nancy Pelosi, the New York Times editorial page and

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others oppose Bush's invasion? "These liberals--better, leftists--hate George W. Bush so much they can barely bring themselves to hope America wins the war to which, in their view, the president has illegitimately committed the nation.... They hate Don Rumsfeld so much they can't bear to see his military strategy vindicated." After the massacre at Haditha, he said, "The anti-American left can barely be bothered to conceal its glee." Kristol has even, amazingly, chosen to echo the incendiary language of his father, Irving Kristol, in his 1952 semi-endorsement of Joe McCarthy, applying the same terms to the Democrats regarding terrorism: "The American people, whatever their doubts about aspects of Bush's foreign policy, know that Bush is serious about fighting terrorists and terrorist states that mean America harm. About Bush's Democratic critics, they know no such thing."

Such talk is not merely misguided--Kristol himself now admits that Rumsfeld's strategy was a disaster--it is slanderous. And given Kristol's widespread knowledge of and social contacts with many of liberalism's leading lights, it's obvious he's aware of this. But he does not care. As recently as January 21, he speculated of opponents of Bush's hopeless surge, "You really wonder, do they want it to work or not?"

Why then, despite his poor record as a prognosticator and his penchant for poisonous political rhetoric, does he remain the darling of so many MSM editors and producers? Why did Time, which already suffers from a surfeit of liberal-hating McCarthyite pundits like Andrew Sullivan (who's leaving), Charles Krauthammer and Joe Klein, choose to add one with even fewer journalistic bona fides and less credibility? Is it the job only of liberals to insure the fealty of the mainstream media to their professed goals of presenting truth in a genuinely fair and balanced fashion? Or is that goal now so quaint that somehow a right-wing holy warrior can be said to fit the bill?

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