

The Bitburg Controversy

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ON MAY 5, 1985, DURING a state visit to West Germany, President Ronald Reagan stopped for a few minutes at a small cemetery outside the city of Bitburg. What should have been a routine visit of little concern to anyone except perhaps the residents of the area, had by that point become a major international event. The imbroglio over the visit to the Bitburg cemetery—which in itself lasted no more than ten minutes and during which Reagan said nothing publicly—threatened to seriously affect American-German relations, be a spur to anti-Semitism, politically alienate American Jews from the Reagan administration, and, indeed, color the way in which Reagan's entire presidency would be viewed in history. For over a month the details of the visit and the debate over whether it should proceed as planned occupied the pages—often the front pages—of virtually every major American newspaper. This article will examine the events surrounding the Bitburg visit, seeking to explain how it became one of the most explosive political events of 1985.¹

Origins of the Controversy

The origins of the entire issue lay in West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl's consternation at having been excluded from the 40th-anniversary commemoration of the landing at Normandy beach in June 1944. Kohl told a number of Western leaders of his anger and, in compensation, President François Mitterrand of France agreed to accompany Kohl to the World War I cemetery at Verdun for a wreath-laying ceremony. There, the leaders of the two former adversaries held hands in a symbolic act of reconciliation.

In fall 1984, during the course of a visit to Washington, Chancellor Kohl asked President Reagan to accompany him to a German cemetery during a planned visit to Germany the following spring and to join him in laying

Note: This article is based primarily on an examination of news stories and editorials appearing in major newspapers in the United States. In addition, personal interviews were conducted with Hyman Bookbinder, Marshall Breger, Abraham Foxman, Milton Himmel-farb, Benjamin Meed, and Menachem Rosensaft.

¹Two volumes that bring together a wealth of material about the Bitburg controversy are Geoffrey Hartman (ed.), *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (Bloomington, 1986) and Ilya Levkov (ed.), *Bitburg and Beyond* (New York, 1986).

a wreath, as Mitterrand had done. Reagan impulsively agreed, without consulting his advisers, the State Department, or officials in the American embassy in Bonn. Throughout this affair, State Department and Foreign Service personnel, who would have been more sensitive to the historical connotations and implications, played a limited role. Reagan and Kohl, perhaps, did not grasp that the visit of two former adversaries to a cemetery in which World War II soldiers were buried would be regarded differently than a visit to Verdun. Some observers subsequently argued that while Reagan may have been naive about the residue of emotions regarding World War II, Kohl was not. His intention, they maintained, was to use the visit to the cemetery as a means of "normalizing" Germany's past and wiping the historical slate clean. Those who were less critical of Kohl argued that he wanted to impress upon the world that *his* Germany was not the Germany of the past. That was why he was so anxious for Reagan to visit a German war cemetery.

Even at this point the proposed visit posed some thorny questions. President Reagan and, for that matter, all the former Allied leaders had to determine how the anniversary of the end of World War II could be commemorated without appearing to rebuke West Germany, a leading member of the Western alliance. Reagan, well aware of the strong support he had received from Chancellor Kohl in the past, was anxious to avoid any insult to him. Moreover, Reagan was convinced that the Russians would use the anniversary of the end of the war for their own political purposes, and thus wanted to stress the theme of reconciliation and the strength of the Western alliance.

West Germans in general, and Chancellor Kohl in particular, faced a different sort of problem: how to mark the anniversary of a national catastrophe, the worst defeat in Germany's history. Was the commemoration of V-E Day (May 8) a time for joy or sadness? Kohl seemed to be intent on marking the occasion as a victory of democracy over fascism and not as the defeat of Germany. (Ironically, by so doing, he was following the lead of the East Germans and the other Communist-bloc countries, who were planning to commemorate Germany's "liberation" from Nazi rule.) On the other hand, there were those, such as Alfred Dregger, floor leader of Kohl's Christian Democratic Union party in the German Bundestag, who contended that V-E Day marked the loss of the eastern third of Germany and the division of the nation into two states. He, therefore, saw no reason to celebrate. Other Germans simply hoped that the 40th-anniversary commemoration would represent the final spasm of historical torment for their country, and that President Reagan's visit would demonstrate that Germany was now an important part of the Western alliance.

The controversy over Bitburg began with a debate over an entirely different issue. In January 1985 President Reagan was asked whether he would

visit Dachau or some other concentration camp site during his forthcoming visit to Germany. Reporters were told that he would not, because he wanted "to focus on the future." Moreover, the press was told that a visit to a concentration camp would not "contribute to the theme of reconciliation and friendship."² Four days later the White House officially announced that Reagan would commemorate V-E Day in Germany. On February 14, the White House, in the first of what would turn out to be a long series of reversals, indicated that Reagan would not be in Germany on May 8; his official visit would begin on May 1 but would end prior to May 8. The decision to leave Germany immediately before V-E Day was apparently an attempt by the White House to avoid having to confront some of the historical problems associated with the commemoration. Little did the Reagan administration imagine that it would soon become mired in a conflict in which history assumed an unprecedented contemporary importance.

At a White House press conference on March 21, President Reagan again indicated that he would not visit a concentration camp during his stay in Germany because "instead of reawakening memories . . . we should observe this as the day when, forty years ago, peace began." Referring to the German people, Reagan observed that "none of them who were adults and participating in any way" in World War II were still alive, and "very few . . . even remember the war." Moreover, Reagan contended, "a guilt feeling . . . [has] been imposed upon them, and I just think it's unnecessary."³

A number of editorials, including one appearing in the *New York Times*, noted with dismay that Reagan's statement about German adults during World War II no longer being alive was made by a man who was 34 years old in 1945, had served in the military, and claimed in many of his speeches to remember the war clearly. Other, more acerbic, critics observed that Reagan's combat zone had been Hollywood, and that this might have colored his understanding and memory of what World War II was all about. The question was also raised as to whom the president had in mind when he spoke about guilt feeling being "imposed"? Was this some sort of slap at the Jewish community? Moreover, various commentators asked, was it not appropriate for Germans, particularly those who had been adults during the war, to feel guilt pangs?

At this point the reaction of the organized Jewish community was rather muted. Most Jewish leaders remained silent, and those who did comment tried to ease the situation by opining that President Reagan had probably just misspoken—a not unfamiliar failing on his part. Among the few Jewish figures who did speak out against Reagan was Menachem Rosensaft,

²*New York Times*, Jan. 24, 1985.

³From a transcript of President Reagan's news conference in Washington, as recorded by the *New York Times*, Mar. 22, 1985.

founding chairman of the International Network of Children of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, whose comments were published on the op-ed page of the *New York Times* on March 30. Another critic was Israel Singer, executive director of the World Jewish Congress, who not only criticized Reagan for his remarks but also contended that Jewish organizations were being "entirely too quiescent" on the matter.⁴

On April 1, in an interview with the *Washington Post*, President Reagan reiterated his explanation as to why he had decided not to visit Dachau. The bulk of the German people, he argued, were small children or not yet born when the Holocaust had occurred. Moreover, he maintained, a visit to a concentration camp would be "out of line" with the sense of celebration associated with V-E Day. Apparently aware that his refusal to go to a concentration camp would anger some Americans, particularly Jews, Reagan went on to stress his determination that "we . . . never forget the Holocaust," and reminded the interviewer of his support for a national Holocaust museum.⁵ Rather than placating his critics, however, Reagan's comments about the Holocaust museum were interpreted by some as a sop designed to appease them. Privately, many observers felt that Reagan's remarks were indicative of his failure to understand the historical significance of the Holocaust. On the whole, however, the leadership of the American Jewish community still remained silent. They believed that the wisest course of action was to say nothing—at least publicly—in order to defuse the situation.

Bitburg Becomes an Issue

On April 11 the White House press office released the itinerary for President Reagan's European trip. Included was a stop at the German military cemetery at Bitburg where Reagan, in the company of Chancellor Kohl, was to lay a wreath "in a spirit of reconciliation, in a spirit of forty years of peace, in a spirit of economic and military compatibility."⁶ (Initially, a White House aide claimed that both Germans and Americans were buried at Bitburg, but this was quickly shown not to be the case.)

This decision stirred a new burst of criticism. Hyman Bookbinder, Washington representative of the American Jewish Committee, Kenneth Bialkin, chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, Elie Wiesel, chairman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, and Rabbi Alexander Schindler, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, were among the Jewish figures who condemned the planned visit to a German military cemetery in strongly worded statements

⁴*Long Island Jewish World*, Apr. 12-18, 1985.

⁵*Washington Post*, Apr. 2, 1985.

⁶*New York Times*, Apr. 12, 1985.

and op-ed columns. Had Reagan's refusal to visit a concentration camp not been coupled with a commitment to visit the Bitburg cemetery, the issue would probably not have become as controversial as it did; certainly it would not have provoked the same degree of anger in the American Jewish community. It was not only Jews, however, who were angry. Among others, the American Legion joined in the protest. Apparently stung, the White House announced that the plans for the Bitburg visit were under review.

The Bitburg visit, which was already emerging as a major political issue, became even more controversial when, within hours of the original announcement, reports began to circulate that SS soldiers were buried in the cemetery. First estimates mentioned 30 graves; ultimately it was revealed that 49 SS members were interred there. When asked about the matter, West German government spokesman Peter Boenisch described it as of "secondary importance"; the major issue, he argued, was reconciliation.

On April 16, Michael Deaver, the White House aide in charge of planning the trip and a close confidant of President Reagan, left for Germany in order to find ways of "broadening the visit." A number of newspaper columnists cynically observed that Deaver, who was famous for finding dramatic settings in which Reagan might appear, had gone to Germany in search of a concentration camp that provided the right camera angle. Still, the vast majority of American newspapers supported the attempt to add a concentration camp or another symbolic site to Reagan's German trip.

At this point only a few journalists defended the Bitburg visit on its merits—as opposed to those who believed that it had to go forward because it had already been scheduled. The *Wall Street Journal* acknowledged that Reagan might have acted "insensitive[ly]," but accused his critics of "political cynicism." While it did not go so far as to openly support the trip, it did demonstrate an ambivalence about calling for its cancellation. Jody Powell, former Carter White House press secretary, writing in the *Washington Post*, argued that the wreath Reagan would lay at the cemetery would just acknowledge the "terrible loss . . . shared by all sides in war." It would be a "reaffirmation of the basic humanity that should unite us all." William F. Buckley, Jr., argued that there was "no political vice practiced under Hitler that is not also practiced under the German pro-consuls of Stalin and his successors." Asserting that Hitler's Germany was no more than another criminal state and that the Soviet Union was "very much alive," Buckley contended that a visit to Bitburg would indicate our support of a democratic Germany. Columnist George Will expressed the belief that the reason why it was not "improper" to go to Bitburg was that in "1945, at the moment of most intense passion and maximum power to act upon passion, the victors rejected the doctrine of collective guilt."

⁷*Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 19, 1985; *Washington Post*, Apr. 17, 1985; *New York Daily News*, Apr. 25, 1985; *Newsweek*, Apr. 29, 1985.

President Reagan tried to defuse the controversy when, in a speech delivered to the Conference on Religious Liberty on April 16, he reversed his position and announced that he would go to a concentration camp. He explained that his previous decision not to visit Dachau was due to a "mistaken impression that such a visit was outside the official agenda."⁸ In fact, in March he had said he was not going because it would impose unnecessary guilt feeling on the German population. Rather than mollify the critics, therefore, the two conflicting explanations further heightened the tensions concerning the visit.

The announcement of a stopover at a concentration camp did not satisfy Jewish community leaders. Elie Wiesel, speaking as chairman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, described the planned addition as a "trade-off" which was unacceptable. Some members of the council, which had been established by Congress in 1980, called for a mass resignation, but cooler heads prevailed.

On April 17, 53 members of the U.S. Senate (42 Democrats and 11 Republicans) sent a petition to President Reagan, urging him not to go to the Bitburg cemetery. On April 18, Elie Wiesel, in a speech delivered in the Capitol Rotunda on the occasion of the National Civic Day of Commemoration of the Holocaust, turned to Secretary of State George Shultz and asked him to "tell those who need to know that our pain is genuine, our outrage deep."⁹ The pain and outrage only increased when, on the same day, President Reagan, in a group press interview, described the SS men buried at Bitburg as "victims of Nazism also. . . . They were victims, just as surely as the victims in the concentration camps." In the same interview Reagan equated his visit to Bitburg with visits by German leaders to the U.S. national cemetery in Arlington, Virginia. Reagan blamed the whole controversy on "someone [who] dug up the fact that there are about thirty graves of SS troops there." Reagan went on to describe the SS men as "young soldiers that were conscripted, forced into military service in the closing days of the Third Reich."¹⁰ Reagan claimed that the average age of the SS men was about 18, but offered no explanation of how he had determined this or the fact that they had been drafted at war's end. Former members of the SS hastened to correct the president by pointing out that no one could be drafted into the SS. One had to volunteer.

In the same interview Reagan indicated what was probably his real reason for refusing to reconsider the visit to the Bitburg cemetery. Not to go would "leave me looking as if I caved in in the face of some unfavorable

⁸*Washington Post*, Apr. 17, 1985.

⁹*New York Times*, Apr. 19, 1985.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

attention."¹¹ This point was emphasized repeatedly by various administration officials in the days that followed. Given the nature of American-Soviet relations, they argued, it was critically important that Reagan not appear weak or subject to public pressure. Moreover, White House officials vividly remembered how former president Jimmy Carter had backed down on the production and deployment of the neutron bomb, despite the fact that then German chancellor Helmut Schmidt had gone out of his way to support the stationing of the bombs in Germany. To do the same to Chancellor Kohl, who had exposed himself to domestic political risks in order to deploy American missiles on German soil, they contended, was an unacceptable way to treat a loyal ally and a good friend.

Protests Mount

The Reagan interview set off a storm of protest even among those who were generally staunch supporters of the president. Former UN ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick maintained that it was entirely wrong to argue that all were "equally guilty . . . equally dangerous . . . equally victims."¹² Others criticizing President Reagan included Senate majority leader Robert Dole, House minority leader Trent Lott, the Reverend Jerry Falwell, and Archbishop John O'Connor of New York. Two leading congressional conservatives, Newt Gingrich (R., Ga.) and Vin Weber (R., Minn.) described the decision to go to Bitburg as "morally wrong"; calling Bitburg the "Watergate of symbolism," they also expressed concern about its potential negative effect on the Republican party.¹³ Former president Richard Nixon and former secretary of state Henry Kissinger were among the few prominent Republicans to openly support the Bitburg visit.¹⁴ Nixon argued that for Reagan to back out of the visit would be a sign of "weakness" that would undermine his "credibility." Kissinger felt similarly.

Palpably strained relations now existed between the White House and the American Jewish community, with prominent Jewish leaders forcefully attacking President Reagan. Union of American Hebrew Congregations president Rabbi Alexander Schindler described Reagan's remarks in the *New York Times* interview as a "distortion of history, a perversion of language, and a callous offense to the Jewish community."¹⁵ Rabbi Henry Siegman, executive director of the American Jewish Congress, observed, "The president would be well advised both morally and politically to tell

¹¹Ibid.

¹²*New York Times*, Apr. 20, 1985.

¹³*Washington Post*, May 1, 1985.

¹⁴*New York Post*, Apr. 29, 1985.

¹⁵*New York Times*, Apr. 19, 1985.

the American people that he has made a terrible mistake and is man enough to undo it.”¹⁶ Howard Friedman, president of the American Jewish Committee, stated: “There is simply no parallel between genocide and the tragedy of lives lost in war. Surely the president of the United States, as the leader of this country, should understand this elementary distinction.”¹⁷ Rabbi David Saperstein, head of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, contended that the president’s statement “desecrate[d] the memory of the six million Jews who died in the camps.”¹⁸

There was also open tension at this point between U.S. and West German officials, as well as between the U.S. State Department and the White House advance team. Each group tried to shift the blame to someone else as the greatest political fiasco of the Reagan administration up to that point continued to grow. West German officials, anxious to prove that they were not the ones who had prevented President Reagan from visiting Dachau, said that they were perplexed by Reagan’s initial refusal to visit a concentration camp. They explained that they had proposed Dachau because they believed that Reagan would want to acknowledge the Holocaust at some point, if only for “domestic political considerations.”¹⁹

Clearly, though, Chancellor Kohl also had a domestic agenda in mind. A crucial election was scheduled to be held in North Rhine–Westphalia during the second week in May, and many people were convinced that Kohl had insisted on the Bitburg visit and the scheduling of a summit immediately prior to the election in order to enhance the electorate’s perception of him as an international statesman.

The Bonn government, believing that Washington was now trying to make it appear responsible for the Bitburg controversy, criticized Michael Deaver and the White House advance team. German officials complained that Deaver had not consulted with the Bonn government when the original plans were made. Ironically, officials at the State Department and the American embassy in West Germany had the same complaint. Press reports also revealed that Deaver, during his initial visit to Germany, had spent a considerable amount of time ordering a BMW luxury car. Critics contended that Deaver had been more concerned about his BMW than about the details of President Reagan’s trip. In truth, however, Reagan had told Deaver and his other aides that he was not anxious to visit Dachau. One aide explained to the press: “He is a cheerful politician . . . and does not like to grovel in a grisly scene like Dachau. . . . He was reluctant to go. . . . And nobody pushed him.”²⁰

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹*Washington Post*, Apr. 18, 1985.

²⁰*New York Times*, Apr. 18, 1985.

Writing in the *Washington Post*, Lou Cannon echoed the view of many of his fellow journalists when he observed that the White House seemed to have lost its public-relations touch.²¹ There were growing fears in the White House that President Reagan's image as a political leader had been seriously compromised by the uproar over Bitburg. Jane Mayer, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, wondered why no one on the White House staff had argued strenuously with Reagan about the possible political implications of not visiting a concentration camp.²² Donald Regan, the new White House chief of staff, further complicated the situation when he described Reagan, in an interview, as anguished over the criticism that had been directed against him by the Jewish community. After all, Regan observed, Reagan had spent all his life in Hollywood dealing with members of the Jewish faith and had always supported Israel and Jewish causes. Protestations such as these seemed to confirm the White House's inability to understand why Reagan's critics felt as they did.

On April 19, in what has been described as one of the most dramatic public encounters ever to take place in the White House, Elie Wiesel, on the occasion of being awarded a Congressional Gold Medal of Achievement, turned to President Reagan and virtually begged him to cancel the visit to the Bitburg cemetery. (The award ceremony had long been scheduled for this date.) Noting that the Jewish tradition required the individual to "speak truth to power," Wiesel—whose appearance was carried live by a number of television networks—said, "That place, Mr. President, is not your place. Your place is with the victims of the SS."²³ Prior to the public gathering, Wiesel and a small group of Jewish leaders, including Peggy Tishman, president of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York, and Malcolm Hoenlein, director of the New York Jewish Community Relations Council, had met with Reagan and Vice-President George Bush in the Oval Office and implored them to cancel the visit. Both the private and the public appeals were to no avail, however.

After the ceremony the White House announced that the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp had been added to President Reagan's itinerary. According to the White House, Reagan had phoned Chancellor Kohl to inform him of the decision. Any subsequent change, White House aides declared, would have to come at Kohl's initiative. That possibility seemed highly unlikely in light of a letter that German politician Alfred Dregger sent Sen. Howard Metzenbaum (D., Ohio). Metzenbaum had circulated a petition to President Reagan, signed by 53 senators, asking him not to go to Bitburg. Dregger described the attempt to have Reagan cancel the visit as an "insult to my brother, and his fallen comrades" who had been killed

²¹*Washington Post*, Apr. 20, 1985.

²²*Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 24, 1985.

²³*New York Times*, Apr. 20, 1985.

in hostilities on the eastern front.²⁴ To critics of the visit it seemed that once again the fate of the victims and that of the perpetrators were being equated, this time by a prominent German politician.

Even as attempts were being made by various parties to find a way to resolve the Bitburg controversy, others were trying to understand how the White House could have let itself become mired in such a situation. One contributing element, perhaps, was the fact that Marshall Breger, the White House aide who served as a liaison to the Jewish community, was not involved in the initial planning of the trip and, furthermore, was in Israel when the Bitburg stop was announced. Only upon his return to Washington on April 17 did Breger become aware of the depth of the Jewish community's anger. Some Jewish figures, including Israel Singer of the World Jewish Congress and David Brody, Washington representative of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, maintained that even if Breger had been in the country there was little he could have done to change matters, since he, like his predecessors as liaison to the Jewish community, was removed from the main decision-making arena.²⁵ It is ironic that the Bitburg controversy occurred during Breger's watch, since Jewish leaders, including those who strongly disagreed with Breger's conservative political views, believed that he had been instrumental in gaining them unusually good access to the president and his advisers. New York CRC head Malcolm Hoenlein, for one, argued that Breger was taking a "bum rap. People are blaming him for something he didn't do."²⁶

Breger's role also became mired in controversy as a result of two things he did in the hours immediately preceding Wiesel's address at the White House. In the first place, he told Wiesel that President Reagan's schedule would not permit him to remain at the ceremony for more than a few minutes, and if Wiesel wanted to have Reagan present during his remarks, he would have to curtail them. Breger also called Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D., N.J.) before the ceremony to ask him to use his personal influence to convince Wiesel not to criticize Reagan publicly. Breger strongly believed that from a tactical point of view this would be a more effective means of convincing Reagan to alter his plans, since it would not appear that Reagan was caving in to pressure. Wiesel and Lautenberg, however, publicly attacked the White House official for an attempt at "censorship."²⁷ In interviews after Bitburg, many Jewish leaders felt that Breger had made a legitimate argument about political tactics. While they may have disagreed with his approach at the time, they expressed respect for him and for what he had accomplished in the White House.

²⁴*Christian Science Monitor*, Apr. 22, 1985; *New York Times*, Apr. 22, 1985.

²⁵*Washington Post*, May 4, 1985.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷*New York Post*, Apr. 25, 1985; *New York Times*, Apr. 26, 1985.

Protests by American Jews reached a peak on April 21, when thousands of Holocaust survivors and others assembled in Philadelphia for the inaugural assembly of the American Gathering and Federation of Jewish Holocaust Survivors. In a speech delivered at the opening plenary assembly, Menachem Rosensaft, founding chairman of the International Network of Children of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, termed President Reagan's words and actions "obscene and morally repugnant." If Reagan insisted on going through with his visit to Bitburg, Rosensaft said, "We do not need him and we do not want him at Bergen-Belsen." Sen. Arlen Specter (R., Pa.) offered those at the gathering some hope when he said that the issue was "not over with finality." In fact, however, it was. The White House had decided, despite the growing wave of criticism, that international political considerations made it inexpedient to cancel the Bitburg visit.

A Range of Views

Public opinion polls revealed that Americans in general were hardly enthusiastic about the Bitburg visit, but did not oppose it to the same degree as did the Jewish community. A *Washington Post*-ABC poll, released on April 23, found 52 percent of Americans wanting President Reagan to cancel the visit; 44 percent wished to have Reagan "go ahead with his plans." A *USA Today* poll published on April 26 reported a 52-percent disapproval rate among the general American population, compared with an 88-percent disapproval rate among American Jews. A Gallup poll, taken immediately after the Bitburg visit, reported similar findings. At the same time, a *Washington Post*-ABC poll published on May 15 found that 60 percent of Americans felt that "Jews were making too big a deal out of Reagan's visit." Moreover, a *New York Times*-CBS poll conducted the day after the Bitburg visit revealed that 38 percent of the American public believed that "Jewish leaders in the United States had protested too much over his visit."²⁸

Whatever the divisions among the general public about the Bitburg visit, they were not reflected in Congress. On April 25, 257 members of the House of Representatives called on Chancellor Kohl to release President Reagan from his commitment to go to Bitburg. (The White House did not seek to stop Republicans in the House from joining in the appeal.) The next day the Senate passed a resolution sponsored by over 80 senators, recommending that Reagan "reassess his planned itinerary." Among the resolution's sponsors was Republican majority leader Sen. Robert Dole. The press interpreted Dole's action as evidence of the White House's desire to indicate

²⁸*Washington Post*, Apr. 24, 1985; May 15, 1985; *USA Today*, Apr. 26, 1985; press release, CBS News, May 7, 1985.

to Kohl that it would still like to find a way to avoid the Bitburg visit. In private conversations with journalists, members of the White House staff made this point explicit.

On the same day that the House of Representatives called on Chancellor Kohl to free President Reagan from his commitment, the West German Bundestag defeated a motion introduced by the opposition Green party to eliminate the stop at Bitburg; the motion was voted down 398 to 24. In the course of the debate Kohl thanked Reagan for his "noble gesture."²⁹ A motion by the opposition Social Democrats, accusing Kohl of injuring U.S.-German relations, failed by the narrow margin of 162-155, despite Kohl's majority of 54 seats in the Bundestag.

Reports began to appear in the press about an escalation of anti-Semitism in Germany. *Quick*, a popular German magazine, ran a cover story blaming the Bitburg controversy on the "influence of Jews" and their power over the "big media" in the United States. The article suggested that "legendary Jewish power had once again influenced the course of Washington and its President."³⁰ In point of fact, however, there was no shortage of Christian voices opposed to President Reagan's Bitburg visit. Rabbi A. James Rudin, director of interreligious affairs at the American Jewish Committee, observed that this was not an instance where Jews had to "solicit Christian names." "They called us," Rudin observed, "my phone was ringing off the hook."³¹

On April 28 an "open letter" to President Reagan appeared in the *New York Times*. The letter was organized by Sister Carol Rittner, a faculty member at Mercy College in Detroit, who feared that the public might blame American Jews for the Bitburg controversy, accusing them of "throwing their weight around." Working with staff members of the National Council of Churches and three leading Christian scholars who had written about the Holocaust—Harry Cargas, Franklin Littell, and Robert McAfee Brown—Rittner secured the support of 143 Protestant and Catholic leaders, who stated in the letter:

We are shocked by the insensitivity and inaccuracy of your explanation that the German soldiers buried [in Bitburg] "were victims, just as surely as the victims in the concentration camps." The failure to distinguish between perpetrators and victims, between the death of combatants in battle and the slaughter of innocents in the Nazi concentration camps does injustice not only to the memory of the dead but to the most basic tenets of Jewish and Christian morality.³²

While the mainline Christian denominations expressed considerable opposition to the Bitburg visit, the evangelical and fundamentalist churches

²⁹*New York Times*, Apr. 26, 1985; *Washington Post*, Apr. 26, 1985.

³⁰*New York Post*, Apr. 26, 1985; *New York Daily News*, Apr. 26, 1985.

³¹William Bole, "Bitburg: The American Scene," in Hartman, op. cit., p. 66.

³²A. Roy Eckardt, "The Christian World Goes to Bitburg," in Hartman, op. cit., p. 86ff.

were largely silent about the matter. The only leader on the Christian Right who publicly criticized President Reagan was the Reverend Jerry Falwell. Two other well-known figures, Billy Graham and Pat Robertson, refused to take a public position, although they did approach the White House privately. Some analysts, including Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, head of the Holy Land Fellowship of Christians and Jews, an organization devoted to promoting understanding between Jews and evangelical Christians, attributed the silence of the Christian Right to a lack of established ties, such as those that existed between the American Jewish community and the major Catholic and Protestant churches. But even Eckstein was bitter at being rebuffed by Christian leaders with whom he had worked on other issues.³³ The American Legion was joined by other veterans' groups—the Jewish War Veterans, the American Ex-Prisoners of War, the Catholic War Veterans, and the American Veterans Committee—in protesting the Bitburg visit. Only the Veterans of Foreign Wars did not speak out, arguing that it could not oppose a foreign-policy decision made by the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Among ethnic organizations opposing President Reagan's decision were the Sons of Italy, the Ukrainian National Association, the United Hellenic American Congress, the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund, and the Japanese American Citizens League. The congressional black caucus also publicly took a stance against the visit, as did AFL-CIO president Lane Kirkland.

Support for President Reagan was voiced by some conservative spokesmen. William F. Buckley, Jr., in his syndicated column of April 25, argued that the visit to Bitburg was no more an endorsement of Nazism than a visit to a Civil War cemetery would be an endorsement of slavery. After the visit Buckley declared that Reagan had done the "right thing," and that his critics owed him "apologies which he will never get."³⁴ Richard Viguerie, editor of *Conservative Digest*, argued that the debate over Bitburg was focusing too much attention on the Nazi Holocaust at the expense of atrocities currently being committed by the Soviet Union.³⁵

Until the day of the Bitburg visit the Israeli government remained silent about the matter, when Prime Minister Peres said: "I believe that President Reagan is a true friend of the Jewish people and the state of Israel. . . . It is precisely for this reason that we feel deep pain at the terrible error of his visit to Bitburg. . . . There can be no reconciliation regarding the past."³⁶

³³Eckardt, *op. cit.*; William Bole, "Bitburg—Who Spoke Out, Who Didn't," *Present Tense*, Summer 1985, pp. 16–19.

³⁴*New York Daily News*, May 9, 1985.

³⁵*New York Daily News*, Apr. 25, 1985; William Bole, "Bitburg: The American Scene," *op. cit.*, p. 75.

³⁶*New York Times*, May 7, 1985.

By the final days of April it was clear that neither Kohl nor Reagan would succumb to the critics. However, up until the president's actual departure, the White House tried to find some way to mollify the Jewish community and soften the impact of the ceremony at Bitburg. Through the good offices of Billy Graham, a delegation from the American Jewish Committee was invited to the White House on April 29, to meet with Michael Deaver. AJC officials who had just returned from Germany—where the Committee had close, long-standing relationships at the highest levels—reported to Deaver that Chancellor Kohl was apparently receptive to the idea of adding a visit to the grave of Konrad Adenauer, the man regarded as the architect of postwar German democracy. Deaver reportedly said that this information would make it easier for him to adjust the president's itinerary. Before the group left the White House, President Reagan and Donald Regan greeted them and thanked them for their cooperation.³⁷

Reagan in Germany

On May 1 President Reagan arrived in Germany and within hours another controversy erupted. Peter Boenisch, a West German government spokesman, quoted Reagan as saying that he "regretted" that some Americans believed in collective German guilt for the killing of millions during World War II. According to Boenisch, Reagan had told this to Chancellor Kohl in an hour-long meeting that the two had held shortly after Reagan's arrival. White House spokesman Larry Speakes issued a strong denial, as did Secretary of State Shultz. When Shultz was asked if Reagan had essentially apologized for the fact that some Americans opposed the Bitburg visit, Shultz told reporters, "Americans are free to speak out on this and other subjects." Boenisch ultimately conceded that he had "interpreted" rather than quoted Reagan's remarks.³⁸

Another controversy emerged regarding comments made by Richard R. Burt, assistant secretary of state for European and Canadian affairs. Burt, who was then expected to be named ambassador to Bonn, told reporters that Chancellor Kohl had said to President Reagan, "We must never forget and we can never forgive." Burt was accused by German officials of "turn[ing] West German policy on its head."³⁹

On May 3, White House spokesmen traveling with President Reagan announced that the stop at the Bitburg cemetery would be limited to ten minutes and would include a wreath-laying ceremony. The announcement

³⁷Marc H. Tanenbaum, "The American Jewish Committee at the White House," in Levkov, *op. cit.*, pp. 330–334.

³⁸*New York Post*, May 3, 1985; *New York Times*, May 3, 1985.

³⁹*New York Times*, May 3, 1985.

came in the wake of conjecture that Reagan would not lay a wreath in order to diminish the significance of the visit. However, the White House spokesmen told the press there would be no point in going if a wreath were not laid.

The Bonn government was desperately trying to find a representative of Germans who had opposed Hitler to be present at the Bitburg cemetery. Yet, even this became a matter of controversy. Berthold von Stauffenberg, a West German army colonel whose father, Claus von Stauffenberg, had been one of the officers involved in the unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Hitler on July 20, 1944, told reporters that he would attend the ceremony only because the government had requested him to do so; personally he found the Bitburg visit "repugnant." Other relatives of resisters to Hitler simply refused to take part. Von Stauffenberg's brother, Franz Ludwig, a member of parliament in Kohl's conservative alliance, instructed his staff to decline any invitation to Bitburg. Marianne von Schwanefeld, widow of one of the officers executed after the attempted coup, said she had no intention of "honoring the SS."

Alfred von Hofacker, whose father, Caesar, had been among the anti-Hitler plotters, participated with leaders of the American Jewish Congress in an "alternative" wreath-laying ceremony on May 3 at the Munich graves of Hans and Sophie Scholl, young students killed by the Nazis in 1943 for their resistance activities as part of the White Rose group. Also participating in the American Jewish Congress ceremony were several black leaders, including activist Dick Gregory, New York representatives Charles Rangel and Major R. Owens, and City Clerk David Dinkins of New York. At the ceremony, Henry Siegman, executive director of the American Jewish Congress, described those buried at Bitburg as "killers."⁴⁰

This was not the only protest organized and led by American Jews on German soil on the eve of the Bitburg visit. On May 4, the Sabbath immediately preceding President Reagan's scheduled stop at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, a group of American Jews led by Rabbi Avraham Weiss of New York camped out in the Bergen-Belsen documentation center. On Saturday night German policemen came to remove them. In a voice cracking with emotion, Friedrich Wilhelm Thieke, a white-haired police official, told the protesters: "We have come peacefully. We have no weapons. You must leave and we have orders to escort you out."⁴¹

On Sunday, May 5, within a half hour after the departure of Chancellor Kohl and President Reagan, a group of 50 American Jews, many of them

⁴⁰*New York Amsterdam News*, May 4, 1985; *New York Times*, May 4, 1985; *New York Post*, May 4, 1985; Henry Siegman, "To Be True to Their Cause," remarks at graves of Sophie and Hans Scholl, Munich, May 3, 1985, as quoted in Levkov, op. cit., p. 84.

⁴¹*New York Times*, May 7, 1985.

children of Holocaust survivors, entered Bergen-Belsen to stage their own protest demonstration at the site of the Jewish monument in the center of the camp. Menachem Rosensaft, the leader of the group, said that Reagan and Kohl "can either honor the memory of the victims of Belsen or they can honor the SS. They cannot do both."⁴²

Originally, the protesters had hoped to be present at Bergen-Belsen when Reagan and Kohl entered. They had been denied permission, however, not by the Bonn government, which actually was quite helpful in trying to make the necessary arrangements, but by White House representatives. When this fact became clear, help was solicited from Democratic senators Joseph Biden of Delaware and Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York. On Saturday, May 4, Moynihan devoted his previously scheduled national broadcast (a response to the president's weekly Saturday radio speech) to the "incredible" fact that "despite the full cooperation of the West German government, the American government has denied these American citizens the right to be present at Bergen-Belsen when our President is there, also." But all this was to no avail.

Ironically, the very White House representatives who had barred the way to the children of survivors had been desperately searching for American-Jewish and German-Jewish leaders to accompany Reagan and Kohl to Bergen-Belsen. The search proved to be in vain; not one Jewish leader was willing to participate.

President Reagan stayed at Bergen-Belsen for over an hour, while his visit to the Bitburg cemetery lasted approximately ten minutes. The wreath left at Bergen-Belsen read "From the People of the United States"; the one left at Bitburg read "From the President of the United States." Reagan's speech at the concentration camp made reference to the fact that the Jews who were buried there had died for "no reason other than their very existence."⁴³ Reagan quoted the Talmud and Anne Frank, who had died at Bergen-Belsen. It was an uncharacteristically somber speech for Reagan, a speech crafted with the imbroglia of the preceding months in mind. It tried to heal the wounds that had been opened up and to demonstrate that Ronald Reagan understood the unique horror that was the Holocaust.

Reagan's speech at the American air base which he visited immediately after laying the wreath at the cemetery came closest to an admission that a mistake had been made. He noted that no one could visit the cemetery "without deep and conflicting emotions. . . . This visit has stirred many emotions. . . . Some old wounds have been reopened and this I regret very much because this should be a time of healing."

⁴²Menachem Rosensaft, "A Jew at Bergen-Belsen," in Levkov, op. cit., p. 138.

⁴³Ronald Reagan, "Never Again," speech delivered at Bergen-Belsen, May 5, 1985, reprinted in Levkov, op. cit., p. 131.

Aftermath

Jewish community leaders clearly felt that now was the time for damage control and that nothing further was to be gained from continuing to criticize President Reagan. Abraham Foxman, associate national director of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, described Reagan in a statement issued right after the Bitburg visit as a "well-meaning American President who had demonstrated his sympathy with the Jewish people by his support of Israel, his dramatic use of the Air Force to rescue Ethiopian Jews and his outspoken support of Soviet Jewry."⁴⁴ Morris B. Abram, chairman of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry and a Reagan appointee to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, argued in a May 10 op-ed piece in the *New York Times* that "Bitburg was the mistake of a friend—not the sin of an enemy."⁴⁵ Decidedly dissenting from this approach was Israel Singer, executive director of the World Jewish Congress, who accused key leaders of the American Jewish community of engaging in a "whitewash" and acting as "defenders" of the Reagan administration.⁴⁶

In Germany, while the Bitburg visit certainly unleashed manifestations of anti-Semitism, it also prompted expressions of true contrition. Thus, on May 8, in a speech to the Bundestag commemorating the 40th anniversary of V-E Day, German president Richard von Weizsäcker stated: "All of us, whether guilty or not, whether old or young, must accept the past. We are all affected by its consequences and liable for it. . . . We must understand that there can be no reconciliation without remembrance."⁴⁷

Still, it was painfully clear that reconciliation had not been achieved by the Bitburg visit. "What should have been obvious from the beginning," wrote Marvin Kalb a week after the event, "is that reconciliation is a long process—not a single photo opportunity, an event, a moment frozen in time. Bitburg, exposing clumsiness and poor political judgment in Bonn and Washington, in the process lifted the scab on dark corners of recent German history. . . ."⁴⁸

For many Jews, the episode not only lifted the scab, it painfully reopened the wound.

⁴⁴Abraham H. Foxman, "Thoughts After Bitburg," *ADL News*, reprinted in Levkov, op. cit., p. 381.

⁴⁵*New York Times*, May 10, 1985.

⁴⁶*Long Island Jewish World*, May 10–16, 1985.

⁴⁷Speech by President von Weizsäcker, reprinted in Hartman, op. cit., p. 262.

⁴⁸*New York Times*, May 14, 1985.

