

**THE BLOG**

History? Shmistory!

By Marty Kaplan

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“It’s too soon to say how history will judge this administration,” says a New York Times editorial on the current White House deck-chair follies. These days you’ll also find history-will-judge-Bush rhetoric in practically every media outlet on the planet. But what the hell does it meme?

The implicit image, I suspect, is St. Peter at the pearly gates, or YHWH writing the Book on the Day of Atonement, weighing pluses against minuses and assigning an eternal judgement. The secular equivalent is meant to be some Final Historians committee — Henry Steele Commager, Samuel Eliot Morison, Frederick Jackson Turner — only these worthies, presumably also possessing three names apiece, would still be alive in the helpfully distant future; their hindsight, distance and context, the assumption goes, will be able to tell us how to assess what we contemporaries can only experience in real time and day-to-day.

To those who believe “history will judge,” I think a measured response would be, What are you, nuts?

Memory is a subversive weapon. History is contested political ground. Historians fight with one another all the time, revisionists sparring with reactionaries; no sooner does one consensus emerge than schisms and schools and squabbles break out. There isn’t a patch of historical ground on earth, from the Upper Paleolithic to twenty minutes ago, ultimate meanings are locked and lapidary.

It’s not only historians who are in the interpretation game. Politicians, partisans and propagandists conduct ceaseless lobbying campaigns to influence the way the past is remembered. Just to take recent American presidential history: Jackie Kennedy used historian William Manchester to reframe the JFK legacy in terms of Camelot. The televised funerals of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan were used to rewrite their records and immortalize Rushmore-worthy accounts in the minds of a credulous media in a mood for hagiography. In the 2004 campaign, it was the verdict on Vietnam that was up for grabs — not because the historians’ committee was meeting, but because the neo-con bait-and-switch of 9/11 for Iraq was on the national political docket.

“History will judge”: sure. And history will keep altering its judgement. The stories we are living though today will have more chapters, but absent the apocalypse, there will never come a moment when those narratives will stop developing and stop requiring us to rethink the plot of the past. There will always be more more documents, more

insider interviews, to reshape our understandings, but there will always, also, be ferocious lobbying for the relevance and reliability of one set of evidence over another.

Deferring to history's judgement is postmodern wussiness at its most perverse. If you don't trust your own values, what makes you think that your adversaries are going to unilaterally disarm and toss the outcome to some impeccable graybeards in the great beyond?

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