

# All Right, Jerry, Drop the Cookbook

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**OBSERVER**

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By Russell Baker

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Americans treat history like a cookbook. Whenever they are uncertain what to do next, they turn to history and look up the proper recipe, invariably designated "the lesson of history."

Wiser men than George Wallace have been skewered on the cookbook theory of history. The country is filled with them even now, so it is not altogether astounding that Mr. Wallace, aspiring to the semblance of wisdom required to satisfy his yearning for the White House, should have turned his mind recently to the lessons of history.

There is even a certain poignancy in the absurdity of the lesson he has discovered: to wit, that the country is in a bad way today because it didn't cultivate *gemütlichkeit* with Hitler's Germany.

Poring over his cookbook, the Governor concedes that Hitler's "despicability" might have made it difficult to effect an American brotherhood with the Axis. He seems to be saying, however, that this problem was no more difficult than starting an omelet and finding a rotten egg in the refrigerator. A trip to the grocery, and the omelet proceeds.

One vacillates between outrage about the betrayal of American principles here and compassion for the confused mind that can find no better

lesson in its journey through the historical cookbook. And yet, better minds than Mr. Wallace's have foundered on the lessons of World War Two, and one of the consequences was Vietnam.

In many ways the internal American debate about Vietnam, which has split the country for years, has been an argument between people who had learned the lesson of World War Two. Unfortunately, they couldn't agree what the lesson was.

The most passionate war-makers were men who had lived through the disastrous isolationism of the 1930's, the appeasement of Hitler and the world devastation that resulted—Kennedy, Rusk, Johnson, Nixon, Kissinger, the old labor chieftains, the press people old enough to remember goose-steppers in Paris.

For them the lesson of history dictated interventionist politics and quick resistance to tyrants with sharp elbows as the recipe for avoiding a new world devastation. If Hitler had not been appeased with Czechoslovakia, went the lesson, World War Two would have been averted. Therefore: resist the tyrant's first grab, and prevent World War Three. And, therefore, NATO, Truman Doctrine, SEATO, CENTO, Korea and, finally, Vietnam.

The Vietnam resistance had also learned the lesson of World War Two, and it was not the lesson learned by most who had lived through it.

For these people, World War Two taught that bombing's chief result was to strengthen bombed peoples' deter-

mination to defeat the bomber. This was the lesson of London.

They had learned that alien armies cannot gain the respect of distant lands by creating governments more responsive to the guest army than to their countrymen. This was the lesson of Vichy and the European resistance underground.

They had learned that war can seduce the most powerful state into great crimes which earn it the revulsion of the world. This was the lesson of Nuremberg.

Everybody had learned the lesson of World War Two, and there was no agreement what it was. And now, we have President Ford declaring we have learned the lesson of Vietnam. It is a statement to chill the blood.

If there is any lesson of history in Vietnam which is doubtful, it is that history is a rotten lesson book, and should never, never be used like a cookbook.

Those ignorant of history are doomed to repeat it, says the homily engraved on the back of every politician's mind. It is a clever aphorism, but, like almost everything else said about history, highly arguable.

We may be doomed to repeat history whether we are ignorant of it or not. As Vietnam suggests, we may even be doomed because we are not ignorant enough of history. Whatever the case, it has no recipes for policy cooks and, as for its lessons, the lessons of history are only what the lesson-seekers say they are, including George Wallace.