

# Nasser debate: Fuel for the fire

Some columnists are known for being feisty and abrasive. Even so, I was surprised by the bitter personal attack directed at me last Sunday by my fellow columnist William Stevenson. What provoked his outburst seems to have been my recent description of Egypt's late Gammal Abdel Nasser as a great man.

Nasser was a villain, Stevenson boiled, who employed Germans to make rockets and as propaganda advisers. Anyone, he insisted rather curiously, who thinks Nasser was a "good guy" is either demented, a communist or a CIA academic. Such a journalistic meltdown hardly deserves a reply — but I hate to see history so distorted, particularly by someone who should know better.

Yes, Egypt did employ a small number of Germans and Nazis, mainly in its abortive rocket and aircraft program. But so, during the 1950s, did the United States. For every German in Egypt there were 20 in the U.S. Following Stevenson's logic, President Eisenhower must also be dismissed along with Nasser as an employer of ex-Nazis.

Shameful as both episodes were, to judge either Nasser or Eisenhower solely on such grounds is clearly ludicrous. If Stevenson had a better grasp of the Mideast, he could have raised some far more telling criticism of Nasser. Since he did not, I will do so for him.

For instance, Israel's surprise attack in June, 1967 that caught Egypt totally unprepared and the armed forces commander, Nasser's crony, Abdel Hakim Amer, high on hashish. Nasser bears total blame for the 1967 disaster, both by neglecting defence affairs and by try-

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ing to use military bluff against Israel. Or, the collapse of the ill-fated union with Syria and the involvement in Yemen's civil war.

There was also Nasser's vast socialization program that proved a failure. Curbs on the press, confiscation of wealth from the small upper class, Egypt's non-Egyptian and Jewish communities were harassed into exile. The reliance on Soviet arms.

Failures, yes, but let us not forget the triumphs. I lived in Egypt during Nasser's years and saw some of these firsthand; criss-crossing the Mideast allowed me to gauge Nasser's effect upon the Arab World. In the West's view, Nasser was a menace; to many Arabs, he was the greatest leader since Salah-ed Din (Saladin).

Nasser was the first native Egyptian to rule an independent Egypt since 525 B.C. When Nasser and his Free Officers staged their 1952 revolution that toppled King Farouk, Egypt had a per capita income of \$100 annually. Peasants, mainly sharecroppers, earned 24¢ a day. Life expectancy was 36 years and 90% of the population suffered from the wasting disease bilharzia. A tiny non-Egyptian elite of absentee landowners held 80% of Egypt's land. The Suez Canal was ruled by 75,000 British troops.

Under Nasser, land was distributed to the landless peasants; medical care, education and electricity were brought to Egypt's villages. Egypt struggled upward from being one of the world's poorest, most disease-ridden nations. The country that had not ruled itself for 2,000 years suddenly became the champion of awakening nationalism in the Arab World and Africa.

Nasser's eviction of British imperial rule from Suez in 1956 marked the emergence of the modern Mideast and of Third World nationalism. He transformed Egypt from a squalid slum of beggars into an independent nation. He broke Britain and France's colonial hold on the Mideast. Nasser set into motion, for better or worse, many of the forces that today shape the Mideast.

Most important, Nasser personified a force — along with his contemporary nationalists, Israel's Ben Gurion, Mao, Nehru and Nkrumah, best described by the writer James Baldwin when explaining the desperation of American blacks, "a people from whom everything has been taken away, including, most crucially, the sense of their own worth. People cannot live without this sense; they will do anything to regain it." Nasser made Egypt and the Arabs rediscover their long-lost pride and self value.

A tragic hero who tried to do too much with too little, a failure in many ways, yet a man who, in his day, shook the world and electrified a generation. To simply dismiss Nasser, as Stevenson does, is to profoundly misunderstand the Mideast. To deny rational judgment of this remarkable man by means of emotional red herrings and personal attacks on me merely diminishes Stevenson, both as a journalist and as a gentleman.