



Just an Anti-Semitic Laugh? Hardly

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"Borat" is many things: a sidesplitting triumph of slapstick and scatology, a runaway moneymaker and budding franchise, the worst thing to happen to Kazakhstan since the Mongol hordes, and, as columnist David Brooks astutely points out, a supreme display of elite snobbery reveling in the humiliation of the hoaxed hillbilly.

But it is one thing more, something Brooks alluded to in passing but that requires at least one elaboration: an unintentionally revealing demonstration of the unfortunate attitude many liberal Jews have toward working-class American Christians, especially evangelicals.

You know the shtick. Borat goes around America making anti-Semitic remarks in order to elicit a

nodding anti-Semitic response. And with enough liquor and cajoling, he succeeds. In the most notorious such scene (on "Da Ali G Show," where the character was born), Borat sings "Throw the Jew Down the Well" in an Arizona bar as the local rubes join in.

Sacha Baron Cohen, the creator of Borat, revealed his purpose for doing that in a rare out-of-character interview he granted *Rolling Stone* in part to counter charges that he was promoting anti-Semitism. On the face of it, this would be odd, given that Cohen is himself a Sabbath-observing Jew. His defense is that he is using Borat's anti-Semitism as a "tool" to expose it in others. And that his Arizona bar stunt revealed, if not anti-Semitism, then "indifference" to anti-Semitism. And that, he

maintains, was the path to the Holocaust.

Whoaaaa. Does he really believe such rubbish? Can a man that smart (Cambridge, investment banker and now brilliant filmmaker) really believe that indifference to anti-Semitism and the road to the Holocaust are to be found in a country-and-western bar in Tucson?

Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world.

With anti-Semitism reemerging in Europe and rampant in the Islamic world; with Iran acquiring the ultimate weapon of genocide and proclaiming its intention to wipe out the world's largest Jewish community (Israel); with America and, in particular, its Christian evangelicals the only remaining Gentile constituency anywhere willing to defend that besieged Jewish outpost -- is the American heartland really the locus of anti-Semitism? Is this the one place to go to find it?

In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez says that the "descendants of the same ones that crucified Christ" have "taken possession of all the wealth in the world." Just this month, Tehran hosted an international festival of Holocaust cartoons featuring enough hooked noses and horns to give Goebbels a posthumous smile. Throughout the Islamic world, newspapers and television, school-books and sermons are filled with the most vile anti-Semitism.

Baron Cohen could easily have found what he seeks closer to home.

He is, after all, from Europe, where synagogues are torched and cemeteries desecrated in a revival of anti-Semitism -- not "indifference" to but active -- unseen since the Holocaust. Where a Jew is singled out for torture and death by French-African thugs. Where a leading Norwegian intellectual -- et tu, Norway? -- mocks "God's Chosen People" ("We laugh at this people's capriciousness and weep at its misdeeds") and calls for the destruction of Israel, the "state founded . . . on the ruins of an archaic national and warlike religion."

Yet, amid this gathering darkness, an alarming number of liberal Jews are seized with the notion that the real threat lurks deep in the hearts of American Protestants, most specifically Southern evangelicals. Some fear that their children are going to be converted; others, that below the surface lies a pogrom waiting to happen; still others, that the evangelicals will take power in Washington and enact their own sharia law.

This is all quite crazy. America is the most welcoming, religiously tolerant, philo-Semitic country in the world. No nation since Cyrus the Great's Persia has done more for the Jews. And its reward is to be exposed as latently anti-Semitic by an itinerant Jew looking for laughs and, he solemnly assures us, for the path to the Holocaust?

Look. Harry Truman used to tell derisive Jewish jokes. Richard Nixon said nasty things about Jews in government and elsewhere. Who cares?

Truman and Nixon were the two greatest friends of the Jews in the entire postwar period: Truman secured them a refuge in the state of Israel, and Nixon saved it from extinction during the Yom Kippur War.

It is very hard to be a Jew today, particularly in Baron Cohen's Europe, where Jew-baiting is once again becoming acceptable. But it is a sign of the disorientation of a distressed and confused people that we should find it so difficult to distinguish our friends from our enemies.