

Whatever Happened To Losing An Argument If You Invoke Nazis?

Well, “Godwin’s Law” disappeared rather quickly, didn’t it? Michael Godwin cultivated the popular notion that “whoever is the first to mention Hitler in an argument, loses the argument,” in a 1990s meme that grew in strength over the years, right up until Donald Trump was elected president.

Today? Well, President Trump and all our immigration officials are being called Nazis because they are enforcing U.S. immigration laws. Just ask MSNBC anchor Joe Scarborough, who compared them to Nazis because illegal immigrants (parents or not) are being separated from minors accompanying them during criminal processing at the border.

Many other commentators have noted that American citizen children are routinely separated from their parents by the U.S. justice system during criminal proceedings. No matter. Trump and border security are Nazis. You can also ask former CIA chief Michael Hayden, who tweeted out a photo of the Auschwitz death camp with the message: “Other governments have separated mothers and children.”

Do you remember Godwin’s Law? Heard about it much lately? No? To understand why, we’ll have to look into what Godwin’s Law really is, where it came from, and why it disappeared.

A Trip Down Short-Term Memory Lane

Godwin pulled “Godwin’s Law” out of a hat in the ’90s. At the time, he claimed people were over-using references to Nazis in order to discredit their opponents’ arguments. Okay, let’s look at that.

According to Godwin, reference to Nazis as a conversation stopper was like a meme. A “meme,” as you may — or may not — understand is an idea injected into discourse through sloganeering or other propaganda means in order to transform thought patterns in public discourse. Social engineers like Richard Dawkins studied memetics - social thought contagion - with the idea of creating public

opinion cascades. Memetics is supposed to replicate ideas in public discourse as genetics replicates traits in biology. There you go. Anyway, in a 1994 article for Wired Magazine entitled “Meme, Counter Meme,” Godwin proposed his law as a counter-meme to get people to stop overusing references to Hitler and Nazis.

Of course the law took on a life of its own in the cyber sphere, and the idea was understood to mean that everyone should just stop talking about Hitler and the Nazis, period. Even when drawing historical references and analogies.

But here’s the kicker: Godwin claimed in an interview published in 2013 in New York Magazine that the whole purpose of his “law” was to prevent lazy thinking! I do wonder if he is okay with today’s teeming “Nazi” comparisons, particularly as people become less and less informed about what the word Nazi really means. If not, then he had either a very Pollyannaish view or a devious view of public discourse when he stated this:

The purpose of it was to label and to implicitly ridicule, in a reductive way, people who fell into these lazy, glib comparisons. So its purpose is fundamentally rhetorical, rather than scientific or observational. So rather than being like Newton’s Laws of Motion, it’s more like the maxim, ‘Keep it simple, stupid.’ It’s a way of tagging and thinking about stuff and recognizing a phenomenon that signifies, in most cases, some lazy thinking.

So it’s not the case that the comparison is never valid. It’s just that, when you make the comparison, think through what you’re saying, because there’s a lot of baggage there, and if you’re going to invoke a historical period with that much baggage you better be ready to carry it.

But the problem with memes like this is that they are intended to regulate speech, which is exactly the effect of Godwin’s Law. They cut off our capacity to talk to one another. They invariably promote the anti-thought forces, not free thinking.

Tip-Toeing Through Hitler’s Tulips

And that’s how the left used Godwin’s Law — to protect favored causes (e.g., partial birth abortion, euthanasia, rationed health care) by suppressing free speech that criticized those causes.

Try to recall what life was like just a couple of years ago when the word “Nazi” or the name “Hitler” in an argument was utterly forbidden. Anti-thought folks who call themselves progressives were especially adept at invoking Godwin’s Law to shut up arguments about, say, the potential for indiscriminate killing if a society loses all respect for life. And at the same time conservatives were oh-so-careful to preemptively acknowledge Godwin’s Law before comparing indiscriminate killing to Nazi-like tendencies.

Matt Barber, for example, was so aghast at the videos that showed Planned Parenthood’s ghoulish cashing in on baby parts from abortions that he could not help but compare the practice to Nazi doctor Josef Mengele’s experiments on human beings. But Barber felt compelled to preface his entire argument justifying his violation of Godwin’s Law: “But what of that rare occasion when the Nazi comparison is 100 percent accurate and the best available analogy for a given set of circumstances? In that instance, Godwin’s Law must properly be suspended. That instance is now.”

Likewise, the author of a 2016 LifeSiteNews article on Planned Parenthood selling baby parts prefaced the logical references to the Nazi’s eugenics program by preemptively expecting to be accused of violating Godwin’s Law.

There was even fear of violating Godwin’s Law when referring to animus towards Jews so extreme that you could only conclude the intent was extermination. For example, Jeffrey Goldberg wrote in the Atlantic about his concerns that then Secretary of State John Kerry seemed not very tuned in to the Iranian mullahs’ deep anti-Semitism and repeated goal of “wiping Israel off the map.” Goldberg explained that he hesitated to use the “H-bomb” (i.e., mention of Hitler) because, in part, he was “very mindful of Godwin’s Law.” But then he said he regretted that hesitation.

Gov. Mike Huckabee got skewered by Rolling Stone and Slate for expressing pretty much the same thing about the stated intentions of the Iranian mullahs, though he used more forceful language. Huckabee’s detractors were particularly aghast that he flouted Godwin’s Law so brazenly. The list of examples of Americans’ utter servility to silly memes like Godwin’s “Law” goes on and on. If any law deserves to be flouted, I’d say it’s Godwin’s.

Godwin's Law Promoted Groupthink and PC

So whether intended or not by Michael Godwin, his “Law” boils down to a cheap trick that promotes anti-thought narratives. It reminds me of the sort of thing kids make up on the playground to get their peers to say something — or not say something — in order to avoid getting cooties. How else do you explain any attempt to cut off conversation about the significance of a heinous event in world history — and to do so *across the board* — by socially punishing anybody who references the event? Maybe you remember thinking a particular behavior, often the propagandistic coercion that comes with political correctness, was Nazi-like. And it is, actually.

The behavior induced by political correctness basically has all of the Nazi elements: intense social pressure, induced self-censorship, enforced conformity, propaganda and agitation, Two Minutes Hate, smear tactics, and the like. And when you're looking for hyperbole to describe the frustration one has with the mind-numbing social coercions of political correctness, what else is left today but Nazis?

Public schools have all but outlawed the actual study of history, so very few if any students today would know what you were talking about if you mentioned Stalin's gulag camps or Mao's Cultural Revolution that killed tens of millions. And despite the fact that Hitler is the most recognizable descriptor for totalitarianism, awareness of the historical person Adolf Hitler is actually dwindling. His evil legacy is becoming increasingly unknown even to college students today. According to a shocking poll, only half of Germany's teens know who he was.

Anyway, the profound irony of Godwin's law was that people engaged in the enforcement of political correctness through practices that look like those used by Nazis have used a made-up “law” to suppress the use of the term “Nazi.”

And Then: Poof!

That changed when Donald Trump was elected. All of a sudden, by the early morning hours of Nov. 9, 2016, “Godwin's Law” was tacitly but forcefully repealed by the anti-thought camp. Even Godwin himself made sure to give them

all a pass. He gave the requested green light in a 2017 Washington Post interview about last summer's Charlottesville stunt, which the media covered by projecting the illusion of Nazis, Nazis everywhere.

Examples of the Law's convenient repeal abound. Most of the rioting since the election are the work of groups that call themselves things like "Antifa" (yet again ironically — "Antifa" stands for "anti-Fascist") who constantly invoke Nazis and Hitler when drowning out, beating, or rioting against Trump supporters. Comparisons of Trump with Hitler and his supporters as Nazis have become *de rigueur* on college campuses. And the Southern Poverty Law Center simply couldn't survive without Nazis as its bread and butter, particularly when the SPLC invokes the term to describe just about every Trump supporter walking the earth.

In fact, the Hitler references have gotten so mindlessly common today that Larry O'Connor recently wrote an op-ed entitled: "What if Trump isn't the Second Coming of Hitler?" After an objective assessment of the state of the union — the recovering economy, successful summits, and more — O'Connor noted:

So, what if Trump isn't Hitler? What if he's an unorthodox man from the business world who publicly behaves like the crass New Yorker that he is, punches back if he or his supporters are unfairly attacked, and looks at insurmountable challenges in a different way and asks 'Why is this insurmountable? Let's try fixing it a different way.' And he does.

What if Trump isn't a fascist? What if he isn't an authoritarian? What if he isn't the end of our Democratic Republic?

All Trump had to do, to defy the majority of experts and analysts who were so disappointed in us for not voting the way they told us to, was not be Hitler. It appears he has succeeded in that task.

Not that the facts of the matter actually matter. The comparison of Trump and Trump supporters to Hitler and Nazis serves exactly the same purpose as Godwin's Law — to suppress speech and thought. Gone are the uneasy apologies from the right when comparing Nazis and people who harvest and sell body parts from dead babies. Gone are the hesitations when comparing blood thirsty mullahs who want to slaughter Jews to the man who slaughtered millions of them. Nope. If

you support Trump, you're a Nazi.

This is no more or less than a continuation, in very stark terms, of the anti-thought, anti-speech practices of the anti-democratic left when they label anyone who has the temerity to disagree with their favorite causes — open borders, speech codes, gender fantasies, whatever — as haters, bigots, racists, fearful (white) people clinging to their privilege, religion, and guns.

Thinking For Ourselves

So here's an idea. Let's all be pro-thought and pro-speech.

We don't need to obey any stupid "laws" that tell us what arguments we can and can't make. Especially ones that are used so blatantly to suppress opposing thought and speech. We can figure out when to use emotionally charged comparisons with Hitler and Nazis cautiously and when they fit (see "dead baby body parts" above). We should be able to figure out when the references are a bit more in line with hyperbole (e.g., political correctness feels Nazi-ish.)

And we can do that all on our own, not "because exception to Godwin." And not just on Hitler and Nazis. The same goes for "hater," "bigot," and "racist." Sometimes those terms will fit, but most of the time they're used by politically motivated enforcers in order to shut down thought and promote group think.

How about we each try to think things through on our own and build a culture that promotes thinking things through on our own? In such a pro-thought culture, the first person to invoke any silly meme as anti-thought as Godwin's Law actually ends up losing the argument.

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