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Nazis for Me, but Not for Thee

Why shouldn't socialized medicine prompt comparisons to National Socialism?

By Andrew C. McCarthy

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It's this week's fashion on the left, and among such fashionably contemplative moderates as Mort Kondracke, to blast Rush Limbaugh for comparing Democrats to the Nazis. It's no surprise that the Obama hardcores are misrepresenting the sequence and substance of events, but I would have hoped that Kondracke would at least have noted that Rush's comparison - even if Kondracke thought it unwise - was neither gratuitous nor demagogic.

To recap, the speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, started this episode by comparing American citizens who oppose Obamacare to the Nazis and asserting that her political opponents were donning "swastikas." (Sen. Barbara Boxer simultaneously ripped Obamacare dissenters for their Brooks Brothers suits - it's not altogether clear where on the twill the swastika goes.) Pelosi's tactic was the shopworn smear we on the right have dealt with for six decades. There is no conceivable substantive connection between opposition to Obamacare and German National Socialism - they are antithetical. By invoking the Nazis, Pelosi was patently slandering dissenters as racist thugs.

Rush responded, and the response did not smear Democrats. He repeatedly and explicitly qualified that no one was saying Obama was Hitler, that Pelosi was Goebbels, or that the Democrats were engaged in the genocidal barbarity of the Third Reich. The comparison he drew was a substantive one: between the Democrats' proposal for socialized medicine and the German installation of socialized medicine beginning with Bismarck and reaching its shocking apotheosis with Hitler's National Socialism. (A transcript of what he actually contended is here, and his website has other relevant transcripts, since the argument was reiterated other times during the week.) The point was to show that if Pelosi wanted to engage in Nazi comparisons, the health-care policies of Nazi Germany had far more in common with the health-care policies of the Democrats than with those of the conservative opposition, which wants health care kept private and reforms to be market-based.

Whether you agree with that or not (I happen to think it's undeniable), Rush was also making a larger point that is not only fair argument but essential argument. There is a trajectory of socialism, regardless of the good intentions of many socialists. As he framed it, you take things such as health care, things that are traditionally understood as within the ambit of individual liberty and free choice; you move such things into the ambit of state responsibility as the welfare state emerges and grows, on the theory that it is government's responsibility to provide for everyone's needs (by redistributing resources); as more things are moved from private to public control, the state by definition becomes totalitarian; and, inexorably, the totalitarian state gets bad leaders and the society comes to reflect the policy choices of those leaders.

Now, we can argue until the end of time about whether that trajectory really exists and whether it is inevitable. But however you come out, it is an argument very much worth having. It goes to what kind of society we are going to be, to what the proper relationship between the citizen and the state is.

Nazi Germany is a useful historical example of socialism run amok. The genocide and terrorism ultimately practiced by the Nazis were horrible - that goes without saying. But National Socialism went on for a dozen years, it was the last stage in a progressive nationalization of German society, and there was a lot more to it than genocide and terrorism. It cannot be that because there was genocide and terrorism, the socialist aspects of National Socialism are outside the lines of acceptable political discourse. Given the immense popularity of Jonah Goldberg's *Liberal Fascism*, one of the most important political books of the last quarter-century, it doesn't look like Americans are as convinced as Mort Kondracke seems to be that these comparisons are verboten.

Let's put aside the Left's propensity to slander conservatives with comparisons to Adolf Hitler, who was patently a man of the Left. Earlier this year, one New York Times writer seemed to find comparisons to National Socialism quite worthy when - at least in the telling - those comparisons worked in the Left's favor. While Americans were hotly debating the merits of the Obama "stimulus" in April, the Wall Street Journal's James Taranto called attention to a very interesting economic analysis offered by David Leonhardt. Leonhardt wrote:

In the summer of 1933, just as they will do on Thursday, heads of government and their finance ministers met in London to talk about a global economic crisis. They accomplished little and went home to battle the crisis in their own ways.

More than any other country, Germany - Nazi Germany - then set out on a serious stimulus program. The government built up the military, expanded the autobahn, put up stadiums for the 1936 Berlin Olympics and built monuments to the Nazi Party across Munich and Berlin.

The economic benefits of this vast works program never flowed to most workers, because fascism doesn't look kindly on collective bargaining. But Germany did escape the Great Depression faster than other countries. Corporate profits boomed, and unemployment sank (and not because of slave labor, which didn't become widespread until later). Harold James, an economic historian, says that the young liberal economists studying under John Maynard Keynes in the 1930s began to debate whether Hitler had solved unemployment.

After all due qualifiers about how terribly uncomfortable he felt about invoking lessons from the Nazis, Leonhardt somehow summoned the inner fortitude to make the obvious explicit:

Here in the United States, many people are understandably wondering whether the \$800 billion stimulus program will make much of a difference. They want to know: Does stimulus work? Fortunately, this is one economic question that's been answered pretty clearly in the last century. Yes, stimulus works.

As Taranto correctly observed, whatever you may think of the merits of Leonhardt's argument, it was appropriate for him to make it: The wisdom vel non of policies adopted during over a decade of Nazi socialism cannot be off the table simply because, in the end, the Nazis were monsters. We may find the seeds of their monstrosity in those policies, or we may not. But the thought that we should not talk about them is absurd. Notably, Leonhardt's piece ran without any teeth-gnashing from Mort Kondracke and our other Beltway chaperones. National Socialism is banned from the Right's case against socialism, but is somehow acceptable when leftists use it as a smear or when the Left's nuanced geniuses, after their very thoughtful consideration, decide its invocation is suitable for mature audiences? I don't think so.