



## The Problem with Holocaust Talk

by Phil Ryan

Saskatchewan Premier Lorne Calvert had the good grace to apologize recently after one of his aides penned a cartoon depicting opposition leader Elwin Hermanson as a Nazi. Unfortunately, such crude invocations of the Nazi era and the Holocaust are far from rare. In fact, the Holocaust and the Nazis are a standard source of attack metaphors.

At the height of the early 1990s "PC scare," Maclean's was willing to liken "politically correct" university students to the "Hitler Youth," and described anti-smoking activists as "new health Nazis," agents of "social fascism" and "totalitarian righteousness" - all in a single article!

Some seriously disgruntled people have set up "feminazis," an internet newsgroup "for people who hate radical feminists." The National Post's Terence Corcoran also finds echoes of Naziism in the most unlikely places. When the American Institute for Cancer Research issued guidelines for barbecuing meat safely, this somehow reminded Corcoran of the Nazi era. Not feeling any particular need to be consistent, however, Corcoran denounces the "media hysterics" of those who compare current genetic research with Nazi experiments.

Nor is this hyperbole limited to shrill journalists. A lawyer for RJR Macdonald has claimed that the treatment of the tobacco industry by the legal system resembles the treatment of Jews in Nazi Germany. Tom DeLay, second in line to the USA presidency, casually describes his own government's Environmental Protection Agency as "the Gestapo."

What's wrong with all this? Most obviously, it is an insult to the memory of the Nazis' victims. When someone casually compares whatever happens to bug them to the Holocaust, they are trivializing that horrendous event. A more subtle problem is the impact of this repeated use of the Nazi horror upon our political culture. In a democracy, decisions are wiser if they are

made after a reasoned discussion. Dean Inge once commented that "counting heads" is better than "breaking them." Even better is when the heads have talked things over before being counted. But shrill invocations of the Nazi era certainly do not promote reasoned discussion. Such talk paints opponents as evil, a disease that must be crushed, not as fellow citizens with whom one has a duty to reason.

Of course Holocaust talk is not the only culprit in this regard. A recent National Post article labelled the effort to end tobacco sponsorship of sports events a "tobacco jihad." This suggests that September 11 may yield a supply of fresh attack-metaphors. Yet the hold that the Holocaust has on our public imagination probably ensures that the Nazis will remain the chief source of over-the-top political insults.

Can we do anything about this? Sure. Anytime a politician you helped elect indulges in Holocaust talk, send them a note. "Don't be so ignorant!" should do it. And if you happen to be an editor, you are welcome to make use of the following rejection slip, to be used whenever needed: "If you really think [fill in the blank] is in any way comparable to the Holocaust, then you are too stupid to write for our publication." With any luck, this will dissuade at least some people from Holocaust talk.

It will also, of course, provoke charges of "Stalinist censorship." But that's another story.

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