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Using 'Nazi,' fascist' as insults reckless, historically illiterate

By Mitch Daniels

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Words matter. They're not weapons or violence, in the fatuous formulation one still occasionally hears these days. But some words are freighted with so much historical or emotional heft that their casual or imprecise use comes with a cost.

For instance, it has been suggested that commentators avoid applying the term "genocide" to China's persecution of its Uyghur population. Even given the anti-Uyghur campaign's massive scale, involving millions of victims, and the genuine horrors it entails, the argument holds that the Chinese practices stop short of true genocide, which means the mass slaughter of an entire people. Accusations of genocide, as opposed to, say, "crimes against humanity," risk "diminishing the unique stigma of the term," the Economist wrote earlier this year.

Agree or disagree, the call for caution before applying the most damning labels is a worthy one. Allow me to nominate two more such words to be reserved more carefully for their proper place and time.

Inapt use of "Nazi" is not new but has proliferated in recent years, hurled by hands both left and right. It was thrown at Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. The term has been used to criticize immigration enforcement by one side and pandemic lockdowns by the other. Even in the early internet days, in 1990, writer Mike Godwin formulated the theorem that "As an online discussion continues, the probability of a reference or comparison to Hitler or Nazis approaches 1."

Such reckless verbiage is, of course, not just grossly disproportionate and non-analogous to the real thing, it's historically illiterate. The Anti-Defamation League has frequently had to issue reproaches such as, "Glib comparisons to Nazi Germany are offensive and a trivialization of the Holocaust."

The term "fascist" is, if anything, even more absurdly misused, also by both of today's tribes. From one side, fascist has been applied to proponents of gun control, mask mandates and speech codes. From the other side, at almost anyone who deviates from their various orthodoxies: people dubious

about cutting police budgets during a crime and homicide surge, committed feminists who balk at today's more extreme demands on gender issues, college presidents supportive of free expression, and so on. A Christmas Day article on Salon attacked Hallmark movies as "fascist propaganda." I'm not making that up.

Here, too, ignorance reigns. The inventor of fascism a century ago, Benito Mussolini, also defined it: "Everything in the state, nothing against the state, nothing outside the state." That sounds closer to one side of today's arguments than the other, but let's stipulate that neither really is advocating the complete eradication of voluntary, intermediating institutions or of all forms of personal freedom. At least not yet.

The loosening of discipline around the terrible insults that "Nazi" and "fascist" represent has crept beyond the fevered denizens of internet chat rooms and fringe "activists." Thinkers I admire deeply, such as Michael Gerson and Jonah Goldberg, have launched the Other F-bomb — Gerson at the supporters of the previous president, Goldberg in his 2008 book "Liberal Fascism." The New York Times columnist Michelle Goldberg spat it at a U.S. senator for suggesting the use of federal troops in a public safety emergency. Good idea or not, it hardly merited the fascist slur, any more than it did in Little Rock 1958, Detroit 1967 or D.C. 2021.

This is not an argument for either side of any of these issues. It isn't a plea for "safe spaces" because of the hurtful character of such invective. They are, after all, only words. It's just a suggestion that words packed with this much meaning not be thrown around so loosely, and ignorantly.

Somebody once said — maybe it was George Carlin, gee I miss him — "What's another good word for synonym?" Instead of "Nazi" or "fascist," how about "tyrannical," "autocratic," "coercive," "despotic" or "dictatorial," just for starters?

Because, God forbid, we may one day need to use those other words accurately again, and if so, it would be important that we not have cheapened them and erased their actual meaning from memory. There are real concentration camps in this world, but they're not in El Paso or Portland, Ore. Innocent people are executed for their ethnic background or religious beliefs, but not in Seattle or Tuscaloosa, Ala. As a people, we are nowhere near the kind of polity that produces such atrocities, and we ought not talk to each other as though we are.

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