

Liberals' Fascist Inversion

How liberals have permuted the meaning of the term 'fascism'

BY FRED ELBEL

Godwin's Law says that when someone accuses their opponent in a heated Internet discussion of being a Nazi or fascist, they automatically forfeit the argument and the discussion is terminated. A corollary is that the longer a discussion goes on, the probability of Godwin's Law being invoked approaches unity.¹

An observable parallel in today's mud-slinging political world is that there are lots of accusations of fascism, although unfortunately, discussion is not immediately terminated on the basis of idiocy.

A case in point is the December 9, 2016, *Washington Post* article by Michael Kinsley, which claimed that "Donald Trump is actually a fascist." But what does the term fascism mean? Even Kinsley readily acknowledges that the term is an all-purpose epithet: "When you call somebody a fascist, you can mean any number of things. Often, it means no more than 'somebody I don't like.'"²

Thus, a working definition of fascism is that it is a derogatory term wielded against someone or something that someone doesn't like—especially if a liberal is doing the wielding. Indeed, has anyone accused a liberal Democrat of being a fascist? Perhaps they should.

In his book *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left, From Mussolini to the Politics of Change*, Jonah Goldberg describes how liberals have inverted the historical meaning of the term fascism.

The book is lengthy, yet its conversational style makes for easy and informative reading. Goldberg presents a solid historical background of the roots of fascism and how it has evolved in America into a refurbished edifice of Progressivism. The book is scholarly and solidly researched, with a multitude of references.

Goldberg describes how modern liberalism derives from twentieth-century progressivism, and shares commonality with European fascism, noting that the international movement of fascism expressed itself differently in

different countries. In Europe, it was expressed as militant nationalism with blatant racist overtones. Fascism in the United States was expressed in the milder form of progressivism as a *softer* form of totalitarianism more in alignment with American culture—in other words, a form of *liberal* fascism that is manifested in an ever-expanding nanny state.

LIBERAL FASCISM

The Secret History of the American Left, From Mussolini to the Politics of Change

by Jonah Goldberg

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Goldberg effectively dismantles the pervasive assumption that American conservatism is fundamentally fascistic. He shows that the intellectual ideas that provided the basis for liberalism originated with the intellectual traditions that lead to fascism. Before World War II, fascism was viewed as a *positive*, progressive social movement in America and Europe. Then the Holocaust completely changed our view of fascism to that of "something uniquely evil and ineluctably bound up with extreme nationalism, paranoia, and genocidal racism."

Goldberg observes that in America:

In short, liberalism in this country succumbed to the totalitarian temptation: the belief that there is a priesthood of experts capable of re-designing society in a 'progressive' manner... Many progressives seem to think we can transform America into a vast college campus where food, shelter, and recreation are all provided for us and the only crime is to be mean to somebody else, particularly a minority.

Totalitarianism is a common thread uniting the various manifestations of fascism. Goldberg notes that fascism is an overarching *religion*, albeit a religion of the state:

It assumes the organic unity of the body politic

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and longs for a national leader attuned to the will of the people. It is totalitarian in that it views everything as political and holds that any action by the state is justified to achieve the common good. It takes responsibility for all aspects of life, including our health and well-being, and seeks to impose uniformity of thought and action, whether by force or through regulation and social pressure. Everything, including the economy and religion, must be aligned with its objectives.

EUROPEAN ROOTS OF FASCISM

Europe cultivated the foundation of progressivism. Germany's Otto von Bismarck instituted top-down socialism in the 1860s, which provided health care, eight hour work days, and rudimentary forms of social insurance.³ His programs catalyzed American progressive thought. Goldberg observes that:

Bismarck's motive was to forestall demands for more democracy by giving the people the sort of thing they might ask for at the polls. His top-down socialism was a Machiavellian masterstroke because it made the middle class dependent upon the state. The middle class took away from this the lesson that enlightened government was not the product of democracy but an alternative to it.

Mussolini subsequently moved fascism not from left to right, but rather from socialist to populist. Goldberg writes that:

Mussolini himself coined the term [totalitarianism] to describe a society where everybody belonged, where everyone was taken care of, where everything was inside the state and nothing was outside: where truly no child was left behind.

Thus the prototype was set for fascism to emerge in America.

AMERICA'S FASCISM

In America, from the 1890s to World War I, it was commonly understood that progressives were furthering the same agenda as the socialist and "new liberal" movements in Europe.

President Woodrow Wilson won the 1912 election with only 43 percent of the popular vote, but with an overwhelming landslide in the electoral college. He immediately began to convert the Democratic Party into a progressive party in order to make it the engine for a "transformation of America." Sound familiar? The phrase is acutely reminiscent of Obama's progressive pledge to "fundamentally transform America."

Goldberg comments on Wilson's disturbing fascistic

policies, remarking that history has revealed that Adolph Hitler was indisputably to Wilson's *left*:

Woodrow Wilson was the twentieth century's first fascist dictator. This claim may sound outrageous on its face, but consider the evidence. More dissidents were arrested or jailed in a few years under Wilson than under Mussolini during the entire 1920s. Wilson arguably did as much if not more violence to civil liberties in his last three years in office than Mussolini did in his first twelve. Wilson created a better and more effective propaganda ministry than Mussolini ever had.

Wilson didn't act alone. Like Mussolini and Hitler, he had an activist ideological movement at his disposal. In Italy they were called Fascists. In Germany they were called National Socialists. In America we called them progressives... They were openly and proudly hostile to individualism. Religion was a political tool, while politics was the true religion. The progressives viewed the traditional system of constitutional checks and balances as an outdated impediment to progress because such horse-and-buggy institutions were a barrier to their own ambitions.

The astute observer will immediately see the parallels between the progressive Wilson administration and the modern liberal administrations. Only the names have changed.

During the 1920s progressivism was renamed "liberalism." Traditional liberalism represented economic and political liberty as expressed by Enlightenment thinkers like Adam Smith and John Locke, who desired maximum individual freedom under a minimalist state influence. Progressives redefined the term liberalism to mean alleviation of material and educational poverty, and freedom to live under the state as a *constructive citizen*, according to the principles of Rousseau and Hegel. Goldberg notes, "Classical liberals were now routinely called conservatives, while devotees of social control were dubbed liberals."

Goldberg points out that both the Wilson and FDR administrations were distant cousins of the first fascist movement: the French Revolution:

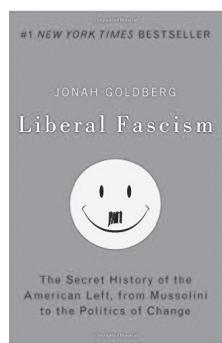
Few dispute that it was totalitarian, terrorist, nationalist, conspiratorial, and populist. It produced the first modern dictators, Robespierre and Napoleon, and worked on the premise that the nation had to be ruled by an enlightened avant-garde who would serve as the authentic, organic voice of the 'general will.'... But what truly makes the French Revolution the first fascist revolution was its effort to turn

politics into a religion.

The New Deal did emulate a fascistic regime; but Italy and Germany were secondary models, post hoc confirmations that liberals were on the right track. The real inspiration for the New Deal was the Wilson administration during World War I. This is hardly a secret. FDR campaigned on his pledge to re-create the war socialism of the Wilson years; his staff set out with that goal, and it was heartily applauded by the liberal establishment of the 1930s.

Under FDR's presidency the term "liberalism" came to replace "progressivism" to describe center-left politics. By 1932, admiration for the Russian "social experiment" was an integral aspect of American liberalism, as was admiration for Prussian socialism some twenty years earlier.

Goldberg observes that in order to purport that the New Deal was the opposite of fascism, liberals then created a straw man out of the conservative movement. The term "right-wing" had already been used to describe a position opposed to Roosevelt, so it was a relatively small incremental step to associate the American right with despised Nazi fascism.



The Great Depression provided an opportunity for progressives to gain control again of American government as they had under the Wilson administration during World War I. This is evidenced by

Roosevelt's 1944 State of the Union address, where he proposed a "second Bill of Rights" that, when examined closely, would have inverted the original Bill of Rights. Roosevelt's proposal was that of providing not individual liberties and freedom *from* the state, but rather a *statist guarantee* of security, prosperity, medical care, and education.

The third fascist movement in America began in the 1960s with grassroots student protests coupled with top-down liberal activists working from within the establishment. Goldberg points out that:

In academia a parallel revolt was under way. In 1966, at a conference at Johns Hopkins University, the French literary critic Jacques Derrida introduced the word 'deconstruction'—a term coined by Nazi ideologues—into the American intellectual bloodstream. Deconstruction—a literary theory which holds that there is no single meaning to any text—caught fire in the minds of academics and students alike who hoped to be liberated from the dead weight of history and accumulated knowledge.

The Kennedy and Johnson administrations continued to promote the liberal agenda that had begun with the progressive Wilson administration. The ultimate quest was to create liberalism defined by economic entitlements and alleviation of poverty under an all-encompassing state. Goldberg points out how this was achieved outside the imperative of war, remarking that Kennedy was trying to revive the national unity of World War II, as FDR had tried to revive the unity of World War I, observing that:

His declaration that we should put a man on the moon was not the result of Kennedy's profound farsightedness, nor even of his desire to wallop the Russians. Rather, it was his best option for finding a moral equivalent of war.

LBJ later shamelessly capitalized on the assassination of JFK in order to facilitate the creation of his legacy, the modern welfare state which originated with Wilson. Goldberg observes the creation of another product of this liberal transformation, *liberal guilt*:

... the most important legacy of the 1960s has to be liberal guilt. Guilt over their inability to create the Great Society. Guilt over leaving children, blacks, and the rest of the Coalition of the Oppressed 'behind.'...

Liberals were *proud* of how guilty they felt. Why? Because it confirmed liberal omnipotence.

IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE WELFARE STATE

Goldberg notes the irony in the fact that LBJ's liberalism reflected the pre-fascist Bismarckian welfare state, observing that Bismarck had pioneered the concept of *liberalism without liberty*:

In exchange for lavish trinkets from an all-powerful state, Bismarck bought off the forces of democratic revolution. Reform without democracy empowered the bureaucratic state while keeping the public satisfied. Blacks in particular married their interests to the state and its righteous representatives, the Democratic Party.

Today, mainstream liberalism is amalgamated with racial and sexual identity groups whose members have been conditioned to expect reward simply by virtue of their gender, racial, or sexual status. This allows the state to pick winners and losers based simply upon accidents of birth. He notes that while conservatives generally advocate a color-blind state, liberals now believe the state should organize society along racial lines.

The plethora of racial and ethnic identity groups has necessitated the invention of the catch-all phrase "multiculturalism" to represent the myriad of special interests feeding at the public trough. Yet a strong continuity still exists between early Progressivism and modern multiculturalism.

ECONOMICS

Goldberg criticizes how economic debates today reflect bipartisan asininity. Ironically, Democrats who want to “rein in” corporations breed the regulatory climate that liberals denounce as fascistic. “Pro-business,” which Republicans support, is not the same as pro-free market, where capital is deployed in risky enterprises.

The increasing plenitude of regulations in healthcare, education, and business is a manifestation of totalitarian fascism. Goldberg reflects upon regulations regarding hiring and affirmative action and asks, “But is it really any less fascistic than telling a businessman that he must fire the Jews in his employ?”

Historically, the dividing line in American politics has centered on the growth of state power versus individual freedom. In an ongoing battle, liberals have been trying to expand centralized government while conservatives have been trying to shrink the size of government. It should be noted that at this time the liberal paradigm is winning.

Goldberg points out the important difference that the argument about the *size* of government is often a proxy for discussion about the *role* of government. Today, liberals eschew discussion of the latter and mindlessly rally around the cult of the state without questioning the fundamental purpose of the state.

THE DANGERS OF LIBERAL FASCISM

Goldberg concludes by emphasizing:

...modern liberals are not cartoonish Nazi villains. These people aren't storm troopers or commissars; they're campus student-life directors and diversity managers, child psychologists and antismoking crusaders. The danger they pose isn't existential or Orwellian, save perhaps in the sense that they might inure Americans to social control from above. The real threat is that the promise of American life will be frittered away for a bag of magic beans called security.

He warns that under cultural relativism based on the premise that all cultures are equal, important questions are decided via a contest of *political power* as opposed to a contest of *ideas*. Today, every subculture has become a constituency vying for political power.

Goldberg points out that a threat from subscribers to today's left-wing political religion is that they falsely claim to be free from dogma. Liberals assert they are correct because they are compassionate, which effectively obfuscates their fundamental totalitarian tendencies. He states:

They've succeeded where the fascist intellectuals ultimately failed, making passion and activism the measure of political virtue, and motives more important than facts. Moreover,

in a brilliant rhetorical maneuver they've managed to do this in large part by claiming that their *opponents* are the fascists.

Goldberg notes in closing that American exceptionalism represents a distinct difference between America and Europe. America has no feudal past or class stratification, as has Europe, with a result that in peacetime Americans tend to look less to the state for direction. Liberals therefore have had to constantly invoke new crises and new *moral equivalents of war* as imperative unifying factors.

He notes how ever-present liberalism in America manifests differently depending on the political climate:

“When conservatives have the upper hand on a cultural issue, liberalism is all about ‘solving problems’ for the average Joe, about paychecks and health care. But on offense, it’s about racial quotas, mainstreaming gay culture, scrubbing the public square of Christianity, and a host of explicitly cultural ambitions.

But if there is ever a fascist takeover in America, it will come not in the form of storm troopers kicking down doors but with lawyers and social workers saying, “I’m from the government and I’m here to help.”

Goldberg makes a decidedly convincing case that today's liberalism embodies a soft, yet still totalitarian, form of fascism. The threat of an ever-growing nanny state comes from the liberal left, not conservatives such as Donald Trump who wish to mediate its pervasiveness. ■

Endnotes

1. Godwin's Law.

Urban Dictionary:

<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Godwin%27s+Law>

Wikipedia:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Godwin%27s_law

2. “Donald Trump is actually a fascist,” by Michael Kinsley, *Washington Post*, December 9, 2016.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/donald-trump-is-actually-a-fascist/2016/12/09/e193a2b6-bd77-11e6-94ac-3d324840106c_story.html?utm_term=.45827143f65e

This accusation is effectively refuted in the article “Donald Trump is not a fascist,” Bookworm Blog, December 12, 2016:

<http://www.bookwormroom.com/2016/12/12/donald-trump-not-fascist>

3. Otto von Bismarck, History.com:

<http://www.history.com/topics/otto-von-bismarck>