

Today's Campaign Rhetoric Is Not Exactly Cicero

On all sides, exaggeration and ignorance proliferate.

by Conrad Black



Election campaigns, especially those that begin as prematurely as this one, are rarely the optimal occasions for intelligently original use of language. Still, the present pre-electoral shouting match in the United States is setting records in several categories. The Trump-haters have plumbed the depths of opprobrious adjectives and have now routinized the misapplication of the word “Nazi” and other terminology of the Third Reich to this president and administration. House speaker Nancy Pelosi was in my observation the first to compare the crowded but adequate detention centers on the southern border, where the detainees are fed as if they had free passes at McDonald’s, as “concentration camps.” She

avoided the evidently tendentious expression "death camps," but there is no reason to imagine that most Americans would know the difference.

However, with the eruption of outlandish billingsgate that followed the El Paso and Dayton shootings, Beto O'Rourke, as the apparently least intelligent of the Democratic presidential candidates, was the first out of the starting blocks to call the president a Nazi. Let us pause to recall that there has only been one Nazi regime (National Socialist German Workers Party), in Germany from 1933 to 1945, and that it conspired with Stalin's Soviet Union to launch World War II, overran all of mainland Europe that resisted it from the Pyrenees to the gates of Moscow and Leningrad (St. Petersburg), and from the North Cape of Norway to Sicily and the Greek islands (and Egypt almost to Alexandria). It was responsible for approximately 20 million deaths of combatant parties, perhaps 5 million civilian war casualties, and 12 million people squashed into cattle cars and delivered to death camps for gassing and incineration, including 6 million Jews and 3 million Russian prisoners of war.

In the whole history of the world, in absolute numbers of premeditatedly murdered people whose conduct was inoffensive, Hitler is rivaled only by Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao Tse-tung's Chinese Communists. Stalin has gotten a lighter treatment because his nation took 95 percent of the casualties in subduing Hitler (while, thanks to the statesmanship of Roosevelt and Churchill, the West regained France, Germany, Italy, and Japan). And Mao has got off lightly because the endless massacres of China were not well covered by the western media and were inflicted on the immense population of China, and because Mao became somewhat popular after Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger triangulated the great-power relationship starting in 1972 and China became partially helpful in ending the Cold War satisfactorily.

Perhaps someone will ask former congressman O'Rourke, assorted

talking airheads on CNN, and MSNBC's Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski (whose father was educated in Canada and the United States because of the Nazi invasion of Poland) by what color of right they utter or approvingly incite representations of President Trump as a Nazi. The Nazis are best known in American memory and popular history for their attempted genocide on the European Jews, which was about 75 per cent successful. President Trump's family is half Jewish, and he is acclaimed as the greatest friend Israel has ever had in the White House. It is as bizarre as it is outrageous that he should be defamed in this way, but it is an aspect of the pernicious ignorance of history being spread like a viral pestilence by ill-informed presidential candidates. It is of a piece with my particular bugbear – Senator Cory Booker's solemn advice in an uncomprehending Iowa school classroom that climate change must be fought as Normandy had to be invaded in 1944 (it is doubtful that he knew the year or where Normandy is, any more than he knows about Spartacus and his slave revolt in the Third Servile War in 71 b.c., another of the senator's gambits). Winston Churchill lost the 1945 British election partly because he called the Labour party's socialism a type of "Gestapo." There are 15 months before voting day; long before that, the Democrats will have reduced the Nazification of Donald Trump to a mere sobriquet, like calling an opponent a scoundrel.

Improvised pre-electoral wordsmithing has produced an all-time award-winning marathon champion in miscues, malapropisms, and fabrications in Joe Biden. The gaffes are too numerous to mention, but the latest ones, that "poor kids are as smart as white kids" and that he received as vice president the victim families of the Parkland school shooting in Florida (which occurred more than a year after he retired as vice president), raise a serious question about whether, as the president remarked, he's "lost his fastball."

Everyone makes verbal slips sometimes; both Presidents Bush

were famous for them, and Dwight Eisenhower sometimes deliberately used awkward syntax to confuse listeners. But the complete invention of an incident that your entire audience would know immediately to be false, from just three years ago, does raise questions about the former vice president's capacities. The significance of this is important, as the majority of Democrats, who don't buy into the Green Terror, open borders, doubled top income-tax increases, entirely socialized medicine, trillions of dollars of reparations for Native and African Americans, and even legalized infanticide, have placed their bets on Biden and are unlikely to change now to Michael Bennet, Amy Klobuchar, John Delaney, and Andrew Wang, the other somewhat moderate candidates. Everyone else is either completely unfeasible, such as New York's incompetent mayor, Bill de Blasio, or an outright socialist. Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders are the leaders of this supposedly "progressive" group, and Warren seems to be pulling ahead with her campaign theme that if you don't show your far-left colors now, you are a coward reciting "Republican talking points." It is a very pedestrian reenactment of such previous campaigns as Alfred E. Smith and William G. McAdoo (Democrats 1924), Dwight D. Eisenhower and Robert A. Taft (Republican 1952), Nelson Rockefeller and Barry Goldwater (Republican 1964), and George McGovern and Edmund Muskie (Democrat 1972). Warren appears to be opening up a growing lead on Sanders, and if Biden can't appear more alert, he could bobble the nomination to Warren, everyone's nightmare of a humorless kindergarten teacher, compounded by her false claim to being an American Indian and her bright red socialism.

On the other side, the president, who has frequently taken liberties with the truth and with language that has worried even his supporters, including me, went too far this past weekend by tweeting out scurrilous speculation about President Clinton's relations with the late accused sex-slavery offender Jeffrey Epstein. There is no apparent substance to the allegation, and it is not adequate for the resourceful

Kellyanne Conway to explain it as the product of the president's desire for a full investigation. There are some things a president does not do publicly, and when he lent the prestige of his great office to the smearing of a previous president, he dishonored the office. I have generally defended his flamboyant and, to say the least, imprecise scattergun of asides, innuendos, and exaggerations, partly because he has been provoked by unprecedented defamatory attacks and dirty tricks, and partly because he is so adept at the important part of politics that is sheer entertainment. This was a mistake, It will blow over by next week; everything does, but not if he makes a habit of it.

Finally, this campaign is reducing distinguished highbrow columnists to hitherto unexplored depths. The most distressing example to date has been George Will's unutterably false and disgraceful suggestion that the president might have inspired the El Paso shootings of August 3. When Trump rhetorically asked a Florida Panhandle audience how to stop the waves of illegal immigrants, someone shouted "Shoot them all." Instead of demurring, as he should have done, he said, "Only in the Florida Panhandle could you get away with that." It was flippant and popular with the large crowd, and it certainly didn't endorse killing illegal migrants. The El Paso shooter's manifesto was available for George Will to read, and it explicitly states that his views were not influenced by Trump. George Will is a respected friend of nearly 40 years. We don't agree about Trump, but I understand why he thinks the president is a "vulgarian" and "an embarrassment." Sometimes he is, but most of the time he is a sensible proponent of good policy and effective government, unlike what the country has had in most of the post-Reagan years. For George Will to accuse Donald Trump of motivating mass murder to the point, as he wrote, that voting for him is a self-indictment, reduces him from the heights of commentary he has long occupied to a nether region where he does not belong. "Sad."

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