

Godwin's Law in the age of Trump

I proposed the internet meme about comparisons to Nazis or Hitler. It still serves its purpose.

By Mike Godwin

DOES GODWIN'S LAW need to be updated? Suspended? Repealed? I get asked this question from time to time because I'm the guy who came up with the law more than a quarter century ago.

In its original simple form, Godwin's Law goes like this: "As an online discussion continues, the probability of a comparison to Hitler or to Nazis approaches one." It's deliberately pseudo-scientific — meant to evoke the Second Law of Thermodynamics and the inevitable decay of physical systems over time. My goal was to hint that those who escalate a debate into Adolf Hitler or Nazi comparisons may be thinking lazily, not adding clarity or wisdom, and contributing to the decay of an argument over time.

Godwin's Law doesn't belong to me, and nobody elected me to be in charge of it. Although I'm sometimes thought to be referee for its use, I'm not. That said, I do have thoughts about how it is being invoked nowadays.

Since it was released into the wilds of the internet in 1991, Godwin's Law (which I nowadays abbreviate to "GL") has been frequently reduced to a blurrier notion: that whenever someone compares anything current to Nazis or Hitler it means the discussion is over, or that that person lost the argument. It's also sometimes used (reflexively, lazily) to suggest that anyone who invokes a comparison to Nazis or Hitler has somehow "broken" the law, and thus demonstrated a failure to grasp what made the Holocaust uniquely horrific.

Most recently GL has been invoked in response to the Trump administration's "zero tolerance" border policy that resulted in the traumatic separation of would-be immigrants from their children, many of whom are now warehoused in tent cities or the occasional repurposed Walmart. For example, former CIA and NSA director Michael Hayden — no squishy bleeding heart — posted a couple of tweets on June 16 that likened that policy to the Nazis' treatment of children in Germany's concentration camps. California Sen. Dianne Feinstein (a Democrat but also a security hawk) has made the comparison as well.

The response has been predictable: Debate for some people has been derailed by the trivial objection that, even if it is terrible to separate children from their parents (and sometimes lose track of them, or make it impossible for their parents contact them, or even deprive them of the comfort of human touch), it's not as awful as what the Nazis did. Or as bad as the slave trade. Or as bad as what the expansion of the United States westward did to Native Americans.

My name gets cited in a lot of these discussions. And of course my ears are burning. It hasn't mattered that I've explained GL countless

times. Some critics on the left have blamed me for (supposedly) having shut down valid comparisons to the Holocaust or previous atrocities. Some on the right have insisted that I'm "PC" for having tweeted (a bit profanely) that it's just fine to compare the white nationalists who plagued Charlottesville, Va., last year to Nazis. (I think they were mostly aspirational Nazi cos players.)

I don't take either strain of criticism too seriously. But I do want to stress that the question of evil, understood historically, is bigger than party politics. GL is about remembering history well enough to draw parallels — sometimes with Hitler or with Nazis, sure — that are deeply considered. That matter. Sometimes those comparisons are going to be appropriate, and on those occasions GL should function less as a conversation ender and more as a conversation starter.

So let me start another conversation here. Take the argument that our treatment of those seeking asylum at our border, including children, is not as monstrous as institutionalized genocide. That may be true, but it's not what you'd call a compelling defense. Similarly, saying (disingenuously) that the administration is just doing what immigration law demands sounds suspiciously like "we were just following orders." That argument isn't a good look on anyone.

The seeds of future horrors are sometimes visible in the first steps a government takes toward institutionalizing cruelty. In his 1957 book "Language of the Third Reich," Victor Klemperer recounted how, at the beginning of the Nazi regime, he "was still so used to living in a state governed by the rule of law" that he couldn't imagine the horrors yet to come. "Regardless of how much worse it was going to get," he added, "everything which was later to emerge in terms of National Socialist attitudes, actions and language was already apparent in embryonic form in these first months."

So I don't think GL needs to be updated or amended. It still serves us as a tool to recognize specious comparisons to Nazism — but also, by contrast, to recognize comparisons that aren't. And sometimes the comparisons can help us spot the earliest symptoms of horrific "attitudes, actions and language" well before our society falls prey to the full-blown disease.

By all means cite GL if you think some Nazi comparison is baseless, needlessly inflammatory or hyperbolic. But Godwin's Law was never meant to block us from challenging the institutionalization of cruelty or the callousness of officials who claim to be just following the law. It definitely wasn't meant to shield our leaders from being slammed for the current fashion of pitching falsehoods as fact. These behaviors, distressing as they are, may not yet add up to a new Reich, but please forgive me for worrying that they're the "embryonic form" of a horror we hoped we had put behind us.

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