

Climate Change and Godwin's Law

Written by Rodger A Payne

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RODGER A PAYNE, MAY 6 2012

The Heartland Institute, a conservative think-tank well-known for its skepticism about climate change, placed the adjacent digital billboard for 24 hours along the Eisenhower Expressway in Chicago this past week. For \$200, they bought a lot of publicity.

Apparently, though now cancelled, the planned ad campaign was going to place similar billboards with the same message bearing photos of Osama bin laden, Charles Manson, and Fidel Castro.

Subtle, eh?

Indeed, it reminded me immediately of the occasional efforts by like-minded political operatives to link Adolph Hitler and anti-smoking crusaders. A U.S. politician recently ignored Hitler's views towards tobacco and just linked the Fuehrer directly to modern anti-smoking efforts. West Virginia Senate candidate John Raese said this a few weeks ago:

"I don't want government telling me what I can do and what I can't do because I'm an American. But in Monongalia County you can't smoke a cigarette, you can't smoke a cigar, you can't do anything. And I oppose that because I believe in everybody's individual freedoms and everybody's individual rights to do what they want to do and I'm a conservative and that's the way that goes.

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But in Monongalia County now, I have to put a huge sticker on my buildings to say this is a smoke free environment. This is brought to you by the government of Monongalia County. Ok?

Remember Hitler used to put Star of David on everybody's lapel, remember that? Same thing."

Right, it's the same thing.

Actually, there's no need to draw an analogy comparing Hitler and anti-tobacco views to terrorists and concern for global warming. The climate skeptics have sometimes gone straight for the jugular:

When Christopher Monckton, the hereditary third Viscount Monckton of Brenchley, attended an Americans for Prosperity meeting in Copenhagen on Wednesday night that was interrupted by chanting youth [climate] delegates, he was reportedly furious. But no one expected him to go back and berate them.

Yesterday he ambushed a small group of students from the non-profit SustainUS inside the Bella centre. One of them texted her friends for help. Several arrived, including Ben Wessel, a 20-year-old activist from Middlebury College, Vermont.

Monckton then repeatedly called them "Nazis" and "Hitler Youth".

Other climate skeptics have positioned themselves in the role of Einstein *vis-à-vis* Hitler.

[Aside: Would this be a good time to point out that some of the professional climate skeptics were tobacco skeptics once upon a time? And I mean literally the same people, such as Frederick Seitz, S. Fred Singer, Richard Lindzen.]

Of course, two can play (and have played) this game. For some concerned about global warming, climate change denial is like Holocaust denial:

Index on Censorship hosted an event at the Free Word Centre in the hope of teasing out the various strands of this conflict. The title – "Is climate change scepticism the new Holocaust denial?" – may have seemed provocative, but it picked up on phrases used by panellist George Monbiot, who in the past has described the two stances as equally immoral and stupid. When asked if he thought climate sceptics' evidence for their claims was as flakey as that of Holocaust deniers for theirs, Monbiot concurred. Questioned on the use of the term "deniers" to describe his opponents, Monbiot said he simply could not think of a better way of describing them, though he recognised the implications the term could carry for some.

CBS TV journalist Scott Pelley went that route back in 2006: "If I do an interview with Elie Wiesel," he asks, "am I required as a journalist to find a Holocaust denier?"

At least some politicians worried about global warming have compared climate skeptics to the Europeans who appeased Hitler, or the Americans who dismissed his significance.

And so it goes.

As a political scientist interested in political communication and the prospect of deliberative democracy, these examples are fairly disheartening.

Just a few weeks ago, I wrote at the Duck of Minerva about Godwin's law: "if you mention Adolf Hitler or Nazis within a discussion thread, you've automatically ended whatever discussion you were taking part in." Or, as one *US News* political columnist wrote, there is "an unwritten rule in public speaking: comparisons to Hitler and Nazi Germany never work." One oft-mentioned corollary to Godwin's law suggests that "whoever mentioned the

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Nazis has automatically lost whatever debate was in progress.”

In this case, I fear that “if both sides do it,” then we are all doomed.

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*Read more from **Rodger Payne** in his e-IR blog, *Climate Politics, IR and the Environment*. Note: Cross-posted at *Duck of Minerva*.*

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