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New York Newsday - February 22, 1995

For Pols, It's Springtime for Hitler

I'm sick and tired of hearing public officials invoke the Nazis or Adolf Hitler whenever they disagree with a public policy or administrative directive.

Less than two weeks ago, John Miller resigned as deputy police commissioner rather than carry out Mayor Giuliani's order to replace the officers on his staff with the mayor's allies. In front of television cameras, he implied that following such administrative directives was a characteristic of the Nazis that he found repugnant. And last weekend Congressman Charles Rangel said the absence of public protest over Republican policies was no different from the silence that greeted Hitler's treatment of the Jews. In both cases, Miller and Rangel revealed their weak knowledge of history and their limited understanding of constitutional government.

Miller refused to send his cops back to the more mundane work of patrolling streets, solving crimes and investigating crooked cops. Whether or not one agrees with this demand of Giuliani's, transferring cops from One Police Plaza is not even vaguely comparable to the Third Reich's policy of exterminating the Jews. And Miller is no Oskar Schindler; after quitting his job, he simply resumed his career as a broadcast journalist with a higher salary and a new aura as the guy who took on the mayor.

Rangel, on the verge of becoming chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, lost his clout when the Republicans took control in January. In less than three months, he's gone from a power-broker to guerrilla warrior. Over the weekend, he equated the public's silence over Republican budget cuts and the Contract With America with the lack of opposition to the Nazis in Germany.

Rangel has obviously not been listening to his colleagues: David Bonior, Dick Gephardt, Barney Frank and Chuck Schumer have taken the time to specify how low-income and working-class people will be hurt by the balanced budget amendment. Moreover, there has been plenty of opposition to the Contract With America, but it's been led by Sen. Robert Byrd of West Virginia, who has out-manuevered the Republicans with his adept use of Senate rules.

Admittedly, Rangel is not accustomed to his new role as a member of the opposition party. But public officials have influence over our lives and take-home pay. That's why they are held to a higher standard. What they say or do is a reflection of our society's values, not just their own. That's why California Congressman Robert Dorian was banished from the floor of the House after he accused President Clinton of "giving aid and comfort to the enemy" during the Vietnam War.

History is replete with brutal leaders: Genghis Khan, Oliver Cromwell, Joseph Stalin, Pol Pot, Rafael Trujillo and Idi Amin. And Americans have our own guilt-inducing experience wiping out Native Americans, not to mention more recently tolerating the deliberate rape and murder of Bosnian Muslims. Yet it's Adolf Hitler whom politicians invoke so frequently that they trivialize the Nazi Holocaust and numb us to own capacity to acquiesce to evil.

This kind of name-calling can also backfire. No single incident did more to re-elect Sen. Al D'Amato in 1992 than former Attorney General Bob Abrams' attempt to associate him with fascism. During the 1960s, hyperbolic rhetoric was the dominant mode of discourse: Political adversaries were called "racist pigs" or "commie lovers," Simplifying political differences with abusive labels didn't work in the '60s, and it won't work in the '90s.

If there is to be a "Springtime for Hitler," it should be in a Mel Brooks movie, not in our political palaver.

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