

Mike Huckabee's *Reductio ad Hitlerum*

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

Posted: 04/07/2013 1:34 pm

Former Arkansas governor, and formerly relevant national political figure, [Mike Huckabee is guilty of the latest right wing reductio ad Hitlerum fallacy](#). The Tea Party and right wing penchant for comparing President Obama to Hitler and Stalin is evidence not of any totalitarian tendencies on the part of Obama. Instead it is evidence that right wing contempt for science is now rivaled by contempt for learning anything about history.

Stalin and Hitler are among the most brutal murderers and dictators of the 20th, or any other, century. Most of the world knows this. To the right wing of the Republican Party, apparently, Stalinism is a system of governance where the marginal tax rate exceeds 35 percent, while the Nazi regime, according to Huckabee's newest insight, was one characterized by gun control.

Stalin and Hitler are now figures from history. As recently as 1996, the Republican Party nominated somebody who had fought and been injured fighting the Nazis. For most of the 20th century there were numerous members of Congress who had either served their country during World War II or been victims of Naziism, but that is not the case anymore. Similarly, most of the people on the far right are too young to have any personal memory of the Soviet Union. Perhaps this is why these accusations now come so much more easily to the leaders of the right wing today.

Using Communists and Nazis as a way to bludgeon one's political opponents with powerful, if poorly constructed, political arguments is nothing new, but it seems much more frequent now, with Obama a much bigger target than any previous president. Most of the more aggressive of these attacks come not from powerful Republican politicians but from media personalities like Huckabee, Tea Party activists or people on the fringes of political life. The failure of Republicans in more senior positions to speak out against this has now become so ordinary that it is rarely remarked upon, but it is still significant.

The leap from a moderate increase to the marginal tax rate to the Gulags, or from regulating guns to committing genocide and plunging the world into war, are enormous and exist primarily in the heads of angry right wing fear mongers rather than in anything approaching reality. While most rational citizens know enough to dismiss the assertions as outrageous hyperbole, significantly, some citizens believe these claims. Moreover, constantly making these comparisons does lasting damage to the political fabric of the U.S.

The debate around gun regulation is important; and it is essential that both sides are heard. It is also true that there are some citizens who do not think government agencies should have all the guns and the people should have none. This is a legitimate view around which a solid argument can be built, regardless of whether or not it ends up carrying the day. However, the notion that if

the guns are taken away, dictatorship, war and genocide will follow is absurd and degrades the very argument it seeks to support.

Therein is the major problem facing the right, and the Republican Party, on a number of issues, not just guns. On too many issues the right has made an argument based on a creative interpretation of history or science. The enduring memory of the opposition to the new health care bill was imagined "death panels" and calling Obama a communist for seeking to create a health care program that is much more oriented around the private sector than that of almost any other industrialized country. The opposition to marriage equality is often presented with illogical arguments about the supposed danger of raising a child in anything other than a family with one parent of each gender, in spite of the absence of any evidence supporting this. Similarly, the mystical right wing faith in tax cuts as the answer to any economic ill, has undermined the ability of the right to be relevant in discussions of economic policy.

This is a strategy aimed entirely at mobilizing the far right Republican base rather than persuading a majority Americans of either the the validity of the conservative position or the competence and maturity of the politicians who hold these views. While it is disappointing and perhaps surprising that so many Americans view Obama as a communist, and how few prominent conservatives object to the frequent *reductio ad Hitlerum* from the right, it remains the case that a majority of Americans reject these assertions. Comparing Obama to Stalin and Hitler has been a losing political strategy but has also demonstrated a right wing willingness to play fast and loose with history and a failure to take the crimes of those two despots seriously, that is genuinely appalling.