

Editorial

TITLE: Honorable Intentions

A friend and past contributor to this magazine, who also happens to be a liberal Democrat, likes to compare George Bush to Adolph Hitler. Outrageous, moronic, right? American citizens are supposed to know better than to compare their president to one of history's most heinous figures. The crime is compounded if you understand that the fellow making those remarks also happens to be a prominent Portland businessman, well thought of in his field. When this supposedly sophisticated citizen makes the "Bush is like Hitler" comment, where does he get this stuff? What civil society sanctions these comments?

In intelligent discussions such comments ought to be grounds for some form of dismissal. But unfortunately, he is not alone in his sentiments or his remarks. And when challenged, he retorts: "I live in the bluest part of a blue state; I'm entitled."

Maybe. No doubt Portland is a provincial place, but where do supposedly intelligent people find the audacity to make such remarks?

One source for this audacity could be one of the nation's leading essayists, Lewis Lapham, the three-decade editor of *Harper's* magazine, one of the nation's oldest publications, and a non-profit at that. In Lapham's August column, ironically entitled "Moving On," he writes: "In the magazine's lead essay this month ('None Dare Call it Stolen,') Mark Crispin Miller asks why the news media don't take a more lively interest in the vote-rigging that fouled last year's presidential election in Ohio."

Later in his essay, Lapham quotes German philosopher Theodor Adorno about the state of affairs in continental Europe in the middle of the last century, "'Things have come to pass where lying sounds like truth, truth like lying ... The confounding of truth and lies, making it almost impossible to maintain a distinction, and a labor of Sisyphus to hold on to the simplest piece of knowledge...the conversion of all questions of truth into questions of power.'"

And then Lapham twists the predictable knee-jerk knife, "Adorno in 1945 had in mind the deliberate subjugation of thought by the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda in the Germany of the 1930s, but his remark anticipates the systems analysis of the well-placed White House commandant."

Again, "Bush is like Hitler"—the name-calling has been sanctioned and not just by the media, but by the intelligentsia of the national media.

During these difficult days the argument can be made that George Bush and Tony Blair's war in Iraq was a mistake. What cannot be questioned are the intentions of the two leaders in going to war. Their intentions were honorable. But this is not what the "Bush is like Hitler" crowd believes with their scurrilous attacks on the president and, in consequence, our democracy. Irresponsible comments insinuating evil perverse motives

to world leaders, which began as shameless posturing by a few rhetorically challenged politicians, has been whipped into an inflammatory frenzy by writers, reporters and community members who should know better.

Earlier this spring Booker Prize-winning British novelist Ian McEwan published his latest work, "Saturday." A significant portion of McEwan's novel involves his characters debating the pros and cons of the Iraq war. As an artist, McEwan does such a skillful job of presenting both sides that while reviewers adored the novel, the *Financial Times* thought the work anti-war, and the very liberal and political *New York Review of Books* thought the writer's work pro-war and reactionary in tone. Given the conflicting reactions, McEwan was obviously effective in arguing both sides. But what was most effective, and most upsetting to certain readers who view the arts as their own domain, was that McEwan gave the president and the prime minister the benefit of the doubt that their intentions in starting the Second Gulf War were honorable.

Granting or not granting your political opponents honorable intentions works both ways: an example, Mercy Corps based in Portland, Ore. Mercy Corps is an international philanthropic non-profit organization that has done important work in the last decade in North Korea, Honduras and Afghanistan, to name a few. Mercy Corps is funded by the federal government, non-profit foundations, corporations, and individuals. Many who give to Mercy Corps are business leaders, often conservatives. In these times, political positions have become increasingly harder for the non-profits to avoid.

Recently, the *Oregonian* reported that a young Portland writer, Jensine Larsen, joined "the chorus of voices protesting outside the Group of Eight summit, the annual gathering of world leaders." The activists, according to the paper, were part of the One Campaign to end world hunger. Larsen was one of two Portland activists who attended the protests and who were sponsored by Mercy Corps. At the moment that Jensine Larsen stood in a Scottish field protesting the G-8 summit, where British Prime Minister Tony Blair was attempting to get industrialized countries to give unprecedented amounts of money to fight AIDS in Africa and world hunger (Blair also got President Bush to acknowledge global warming as a problem for the first time), four Islamic Jihad bombs ripped apart three subway cars and a double-decker bus in London, killing more than 50 people.

Now at first glance, it seems odd that Mercy Corps would spend donated money to sponsor activists to denounce a conference of Western leaders when at the same time Western civilization as we know it is under attack, at war. Comparisons of both sponsors and activists to "the enemy within" could easily be made. But that would be wrong. The intentions of Mercy Corps in ending world hunger are admirable, their motives good. Their politics might be wrong-headed, their tactics questionable, and their G-8 summit timing atrocious, but as to their motives, the benefit of doubt is theirs. Their recent annual report detailing worldwide good works confirms this.

Still, business leaders and those who fund non-profits like Mercy Corps may not always come to this conclusion, especially if those on the left continue to engage in the ugly character assassination that has marked so much of George Bush's presidency. It's not

impossible to rise above honest disagreements and support a political opponent's good deeds (a businessman might find Mercy Corps' politics too leftist, but still write a check to help feed the poor). But when opponents with good motives begin to accuse each other of evil intent, then it's unrealistic to expect continued cooperation. We can write a check to a different organization or vote for a different candidate—these are our freedoms. But if Mercy Corps is the best organization to fight hunger or Bush or Blair the winning candidate for these four years, then we must write the check or support our leaders and hope, yes hope, that disagreeable politics will not displace good results.

The alternative puts us at each other's throats with *no hope* of good results. And it is everyone's responsibility—the media, politicians, ordinary citizens—to stem this rising tide of hateful accusations. Talk of "Bush is like Hitler" may seem frivolous, ignorant at first, but in the long run those who sow seeds of hatred by maligning the motives of decent political opponents threaten our democracy in the most profound way.