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THE SPECTATOR

The Tea Party's Toxic Take on History

Ignore it at your peril.

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Posted Thursday, April 22, 2010, at 4:50 PM ET

I am a great believer in used-bookstore serendipity. Sometimes when you're thinking about how to express something, you find a perfect exemplification of it just by chance in the musty stacks of such an emporium. Here's a remarkable example. I'd been trying to find a way to write about Tea Party ideology, and in particular about the fraudulent history and distorted language it indulges in. Listen to Tea Partiers on cable news—or read the signs they hoist or their Internet comments—and you frequently encounter the flagrant abuse, the historically ignorant misuse, of words such as *tyranny*, *communist*, *Marxist*, *fascist*, and *socialist*.

You hear them say, for instance, that we live under "tyranny" because one side lost a health care vote in an elected legislative body. And that, in all seriousness, the president is a communist. For many Tea Party members, the word is not just a vile epithet; it's a realistic political description. Check out this [clip](#) in which Tea Party "celebrity" spokeswoman Victoria Jackson flatly tells a flummoxed Fox News host, "The president's a communist." When the host (the Fox host!) starts to object, she responds that Glenn Beck has taught her that *progressive* is a code word for *communist*. (Time to put that ugly hammer and sickle logo inside the "O" on your I-hate-Obama T.P. protest sign!)

Unless of course Obama is really a "fascist," as some T.P.ers have it, because he's a liberal, and liberals are fascists (as we all know from that magisterial work of history, [Liberal Fascism](#) by Jonah Goldberg). So instead of the hammer and sickle, draw a little Hitler mustache on Obama's face on your T.P. hate signs. Or better yet, parade around with a swastika! (The Tea Partiers seem to get a special kick out of this, for some reason.)

Of course Obama is also probably an evil "socialist" which is apparently, in the Tea Party worldview, pretty much the same as a fascist or a communist. (One gets the impression that some T.P.ers have had major, life-changing, "aha!" moments when they first learned that Hitler's party was the National SOCIALIST German Workers Party. Slam dunk!)*

And if Obama's not a socialist fascist communist, he may be—ooh, scary, kids!—a "progressive," which, as Victoria Jackson learned from the erudite Glenn Beck, is really a secret "code word" for



communist.

And they believe him! That's the thing. The recent *New York Times* study of T.P.ers reported that party members are "better educated" than most Americans. But educated in what? Clearly, they—or at least a significant, influential portion of them—are utterly uneducated in history. One can get a college degree without taking a single class in world history and thus still be ripe for the idiot distortions of a Glenn Beck.

Most people with a basic grounding in history find Tea Party ignorance something to laugh about, certainly not something to take seriously. But I would argue that history demonstrates that historical ignorance is dangerous and that it can have tragic consequences, however laughable it may initially seem. And thus the media, liberals, and others are misguided in laughing it off. And educated conservatives are irresponsible in staying silent in the face of these distortions.

The muddled Tea Party version of history is more than wrong and fraudulent. It's offensive. Calling Obama a tyrant, a communist, or a fascist is deeply offensive to all the *real* victims of tyranny, the *real* victims of communism and fascism. The tens of millions murdered. It trivializes such suffering inexcusably for the T.P.ers to claim that *they* are suffering from similar oppression because they might have their taxes raised or be subject to demonic "federal regulation."

The media for the most part has shown itself afraid to challenge the insidious distortions of language and history Tea Partiers promote. In the last few weeks, several news outlets have been propagating the meme that Tea Partiers are "just regular folks." And certainly some are. But if you examined the ideology that shows its face, the one that is apparent in sign carriers and blog commenters and cable spokespersons, you find something disturbing.

Consider this CNN [report](#), which attempts to give a smiley face to the Tea Party's underlying ideology. Even Fox News [recognizes](#) Tea Party dogma as a seething cauldron of deranged and vicious lies about history. Look at the guy in the [photo](#) in this report and how proud he is of his illiterate swastika sign.

These swastika nuts look ridiculous. But words matter, sometimes in a life-and-death way. Take for instance the Tea Party demonization of "federal regulation" as the instrument of the tyranny that's been imposed on them. I would like every Tea Partier who has denounced federal regulation to write a letter to the widows and children of the coalminers in West Virginia who died because of the failure of "federal regulation" of mine safety.

Tell the weeping survivors that such regulation is tyranny, that their husbands and fathers had to die, but for a good cause: lowering federal spending so the T.P.ers could save a few pennies on taxes. That's worth 29 lives snuffed out in a mine blast, isn't it? They either don't see the connection or don't care.

Indeed the demonization of "federal regulation" could prevent cowardly legislators from strengthening protections for miners and other workers imperiled by unsafe conditions. But the happy T.P.ers will still go out with their swastika and Hitler-mustache signs, whining about tyranny. Wouldn't it be great if there were a liberal politician who, in the wake of the mining catastrophe, had the courage to stand up and say that federal regulations are often a very good

