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Guest Author — Donald Trump, The Apprentice Demagogue



By Chris Weigant

In the online world, people get compared to Adolf Hitler so often that many years ago “Godwin’s Law” was created to give a definition to the phenomenon. In politics, Hitler analogies usually aren’t quite as frequent, but they are getting much more common these days. It’s one thing to see this accusation hurled in an article’s comments section, or even by a late-night [comedian](#) (trolling for some laughs), but what is new this year is hearing members of Donald Trump’s own party comparing him to fascist leaders (as Meg Whitman recently did).

So when political science Professor Kenneth Janda asked if he could write a column making a more academic comparison (instead of just hurling insults), I thought it’d be a great idea. Janda is the Payson S. Wild Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Northwestern University, and he’s both written [a guest article](#) here before and also been [an interview subject](#) (in the midst of the 2008 campaign).

Janda makes a pretty good case, drawing on historical data from Hitler’s own political campaigns as well as quotes from Donald Trump during the past year.

Donald Trump, The Apprentice Demagogue

Donald Trump is clearly no Adolf Hitler. Trump does not preach Hitler's most hateful domestic policies, and Trump's foreign policy is not imperialist but isolationist. Trump's slogan, "American First," resembles "*Deutschland über alles*" ("Germany above all else") more in chauvinistic simplicity than evil intent. But it does underscore that Trump is, as Hitler was, a demagogue, appealing to voters' emotions and prejudices in order to win election.

Others observed similarities between the Trump and Hitler election campaigns quite early. They included Mexican president [Enrique Peña Nieto](#), former Mexican president [Vicente Fox](#), and former New Jersey Republican governor [Christine Todd Whitman](#). Recently, major Republican donor and former California gubernatorial candidate, Hewlett-Packard C.E.O. Meg Whitman [compared Trump](#) to the fascist demagogues, Hitler and Mussolini. Now that Trump is the presumptive nominee of the Republican Party for President of the United States, we should inquire closely into Trump's and Hitler's electioneering.

Did Hitler even campaign in free elections before seizing power? His Nazi party, NSDAP, contested five parliamentary elections, winning 3 percent of the votes (ninth place) in 1928; 18 percent (second) in 1930; 37 percent (first) in July 1932; 33 percent (first) in November 1932; 44 percent (first) in March 1933. Over three elections spanning less than one year, NSDAP emerged as Germany's largest and most stable party.

Although Germany's incumbent Paul von Hindenburg defeated Hitler 53 to 37 percent in the April 1932 presidential election, Hindenburg was pressured to appoint Hitler as Chancellor and head of government. With great reluctance, the 84-year-old president complied on January 30, 1933. Controlling the government and banning opposition, NSDAP won all the seats in the November 1933 election. Hindenburg died in August 1934, after which Hitler declared himself head of state.

Let's examine what some historians wrote about Hitler's campaigns to gain power. I quote from three books: Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (2003); Ian Kershaw, *Hitler* (2008); and Laurence Rees, *Hitler's Charisma* (2012). These sources support ten similarities between Trump's 2016 campaign and Hitler's electioneering.

(1.) *Hitler was underestimated by political observers at the start.* Kershaw wrote: "[M]any contemporaries made a mistake in treating *Mein Kampf* with ridicule and not taking the

ideas Hitler expressed there extremely seriously.” (p. 149) Evans found that “political opponents on the left still found it impossible to take the Nazis’ extremist rhetoric and bullying tactics on the street as anything other than evidence of their inevitable political marginality. They did not conform to the accepted rules of politics, so they could not expect to be successful.” (p. 255)

Trump was not perceived as a “serious candidate” — as Jeb Bush charged in the September 16 Republican primary debate. Trump replied: “I’m a businessman, did really well, really well, and Jeb, what I want to do is put that ability into this country to make our country rich again. And I can do that, and I’m not sure that anybody else in the group will be able to do that.”

(2.) Hitler had political experience but no government experience. “Hitler had the advantage of being undamaged by participation in an unpopular government, and of unwavering radicalism in his hostility to the Republic. He could speak in language more and more Germans understood — the language of bitter protest at a discredited system.” (Kershaw: 206)

Trump lacks and denigrates government experience. He said at the February 13 primary debate: “I’m the only one on this stage that said, ‘Do not go into Iraq. Do not attack Iraq.’ Nobody else on this stage said that.... And I was in the private sector. I wasn’t a politician, fortunately.” Trump also responded to Greta Van Susteren on Fox News, “I think the people are tired of politicians, because again: all talk, no action, nothing gets done.”

(3.) Hitler benefitted from economic hardships visited on the working class. “The most important precondition for Hitler’s rise in popularity was the apparent failure of democracy in the face of economic crisis.” (Rees: 57) While Hitler did not explain how he would improve the economy, “He presented a vision, a Utopia, an ideal: national liberation through strength and unity. He did not propose alternative policies, built into specific election promises.” (Kershaw: 203)

Trump exploits fears of unemployment and economic insecurity. In the October 28 debate, Trump explained: “Yes, it’s very simple.... We’re going to bring jobs back from Japan, we’re

going to bring jobs back from China, we're going to bring, frankly, jobs back from Mexico.... We're going to bring jobs and manufacturing back. We're going to cut costs. We're going to save Social Security, and we're going to save Medicare.”

(4.) Hitler offered no detailed programs for taxing and spending. NSDAP followers “had no idea of the aims of the party. But they were certain that the government was incapable and the authorities were squandering taxpayers’ money. They were convinced ‘that only the National Socialists could be the saviours from this alleged misery.’” (Kershaw: 192)

Trump says that budgetary salvation is easy. Asked on February 25 how he would cut the federal budget, he replied: “Waste, fraud and abuse all over the place. Waste, fraud and abuse. You look at what’s happening with Social Security, look at what’s happening with every agency, waste, fraud and abuse. We will cut so much, your head will spin.”

(5.) Hitler was supremely confident in his judgments. “Hitler’s analysis left no room for any doubt. He never appeared remotely undecided between possible options.” (Rees: 27)

Trump makes bold claims backed by little evidence: Asked on August 6 for evidence that Mexico is sending criminals across the border, Trump answered: “Border Patrol, people that I deal with, that I talk to, they say this is what’s happening.”

(6.) Hitler made promises to voters without explaining how he could fulfill them. Hitler “did not concern himself with practical realities, but with ‘eternal truth’, as the great religious leaders had done. The ‘greatness’ of the ‘politician’ lay in the successful practical implementation of the ‘idea’ advanced by the ‘programmatist.’” (Kershaw: 157)

Trump does the same. Asked by Fox news commentator, Bill O’Reilly, on August 4 how he would get Mexico to pay for the wall he promised to build across the border, Trump replied: “I’m gonna say, ‘Mexico, this is not going to continue, you’re going to pay for that wall,’ and they will pay for the wall.”

(7.) Hitler was bluntly dogmatic. “There were no qualifications in what [Hitler] said; everything was absolute, uncompromising, irrevocable, undeviating, unalterable, final.” (Rees: 171)

Trump “tells it like it is.” Asked on August 6 about his disparaging comments about women’s looks, Trump responded: “I think the big problem this country has is being politically correct. [APPLAUSE] I’ve been challenged by so many people, and I don’t frankly have time for total political correctness. And to be honest with you, this country doesn’t have time either.”

(8.) Hitler exploited people’s fears and prejudices. Kershaw wrote, “The more Hitler preached intolerance, force, and hatred, as the solution to Germany’s problems, the more his audience liked it. He was interrupted on numerous occasions during these passages with cheers and shouts of ‘bravo’.” (Kershaw: 179)

Trump capitalizes on xenophobia. On December 7 his campaign called “for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country’s representatives can figure out what the Hell is going on.” On December 15, CNN’s Wolf Blitzer asked about banning Muslims and refugees fleeing ISIS, Trump replied: “...tens of thousands of people having cell phones with ISIS flags on them? I don’t think so, Wolf. They’re not coming to this country. And if I’m president and if Obama has brought some to this country, they are leaving. They’re going. They’re gone.” [APPLAUSE]

(9.) Hitler enticed voters to view his policies as nondiscriminatory. Rees quoted one Nazi youth who said, “Racist is not the right word in my opinion.” The youth preferred “a ‘belief in natural orders’ that was against ‘multi-culturalism.’” (p. 58)

Trump reassuringly does not oppose all Mexican immigrants. Announcing his intention on June 16, 2015, to seek the Republican presidential nomination Trump said: “They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. [sic] They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”

(10.) Hitler promised to restore Germany's glory. Hitler promised a “new Reich that would rebuild Germany’s economic strength and restore the nation to its rightful place in the world. This was a message that had powerful appeal to many who looked nostalgically back to the Reich created by Bismarck, and dreamed of a new leader who would resurrect Germany’s lost glory.” (Evans: 257)

Trump promises to make America “great again.” On December 15, Trump said, in his closing statement: “Our country doesn’t win anymore. We don’t win on trade. We don’t win on the military. We can’t defeat ISIS.... If I’m elected president, we will win again. We will win a lot. And we’re going to have a great, great country, greater than ever before.”

German voters eventually succumbed to Hitler’s demagoguery and hired him to govern them. Please remind me, did he manage to restore Germany’s glory?

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