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By Earl Raab

There is a frightening moral bankruptcy in efforts to equate all terrible events with Nazism, and to equate all of Nazism with the Holocaust.

There is no acceptable or speakable way of comparing the horror of different millions of human beings being killed, whatever the cause. But there is a reason for differentiating the causes, the circumstances and therefore the meanings.

There was nothing more tragic than the mass mutual slaughter of Americans at the battle of Antietam during the civil war - and there was nothing more tragic than the mass murder of Blacks in the Long Passage from Africa to American slavery.

But they were different. They had a different moral weight necessarily because they compounded out of different kinds of human intent. The Generals at Antietam, as careless as they may have been of life or wrong-headed about tactics, would have been happy enough to accept surrender from the other side without imposing suffering on their adversaries. Both sides had what they thought was a noble cause. But the very purpose of the slave-traders was to place Black Africans in a state of suffering. Their cause would not have prospered otherwise.

A reductionism which does not differentiate meanings among equal tragedies, not only dulls the human moral sense, but the historical sense as well, and makes us incapable of appropriate remedial responses. Nazism was a variant of the ultimate expression of totalitarianism. It was not just a bestialism; it had a specific political meaning. It demonstrated what can happen to an advanced, industrialized society - and perhaps only

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to such a society - often under "good" slogans. A mass murder by a Manson gang is fully bestial and fully tragic, but it is not "Nazism." Mass slaughter in a Chad war is fully bestial and fully tragic but it is not Nazism. If we equate every tragedy or evil with Nazism, then we are kidding ourselves into a dangerous historical insensitivity.

Likewise, there were many victims of Nazism. Political dissidents, activist Catholic and Protestant ministers, labor leaders, gays, and other groups, were picked out for special persecution, incarceration and frequent murder. Hundreds of thousands of helpless Poles and other Eastern Europeans were slaughtered, outside the framework of warfare.

But only for the Jews did the Nazis adopt a specific policy that every man, woman and child of that human group was to be extinguished.

There is no measure that we can or would want to use to say that the suffering of one group under Nazi bestiality was more intense than the suffering of another group. But the policy against the Jews was different. It is a special measure of the potential for human evil when a society can say that it is intent on killing every last member of a group just because of their ancestry. That is the ultimate expression of contempt for the sanctity of human life. Such a policy lays naked, as nothing else can, the anti-human center of Nazism, clothed as it may be in modern dress.

And that is the universal meaning of the Holocaust, as revealed in the unique experience of the Jews under the Nazis. Survivor Jews will understandably memorialize this experience, with or without the participation of anyone else. But there are many citizens, not Jewish, who understand that the Holocaust of the Jews must be burned in the world's memory for the world's sake, for the sake of universal human rights, as a reminder of the ultimate anti-human core of Nazism, a threat to everyone. Certainly those with artistic sensibilities understand the use of the particular to underline the universal.

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