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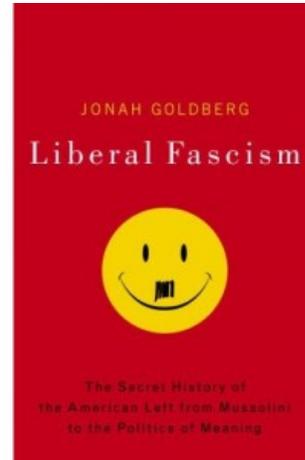
## Please . . . Get a New Word

Monday, August 18, 2008

Books on political affairs and current events come regularly and many pack a partisan punch. This is especially true in the intense political season of a presidential campaign. Publishers have been releasing title after title into the political torrent.

One of the most interesting of these is *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* by Jonah Goldberg. A popular conservative commentator long associated with *National Review* magazine, Goldberg is a very capable writer. He has a rare ability to inject humor into serious argument — and to get away with it.

In *Liberal Fascism* he goes after the impulse to combine utopian visions with intellectual arrogance and a willingness to coerce others into compliance. Goldberg rightly traces the modern ideology of fascism back to Italian dictator Benito Mussolini and deals forthrightly with the fascist ideology of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi movement. He then proceeds to argue that contemporary American liberalism embodies a new form of fascism — a fascism with a smiling face, perhaps more therapeutic than terrifying.



Goldberg offers solid insights in this book, and *Liberal Fascism* is a good introduction to many of the debates now raging with American culture. He also provides historical analysis and a sense of intellectual context. Nonetheless, the book has a major problem — its title.

Given the horrifying experience of the twentieth century, we should be extremely reluctant to use the term fascism without a direct reference to the murderous regimes of fascist Europe — and the Third Reich in particular. Intellectual credibility suffers when words are used carelessly and wrongly. Jonah Goldberg rightly complains that liberals often wrongly accuse conservatism of being latent fascism when engaged in argument. True enough, but turning the word on liberalism scarcely helps. Intellectual discourse and political debate are reduced to name-calling, and understanding is often lost. *Liberal Fascism* is worth reading, but the book and its argument would have been stronger and more credible without the reference to fascism.

An excerpt:

*Again, it is my argument that American liberalism is a totalitarian political religion, but not necessarily an Orwellian one. It is nice, not brutal. Nannying, not bullying. But it is definitely totalitarian — or “holistic,” if you prefer — in that liberalism today sees no realm of human life that is beyond political significance, from what you eat to what you smoke to what you say. Sex is political. Food is political. Sports, entertainment, your inner motives and outer appearance, all have political salience for liberal fascists. Liberals place their faith in priestly experts who know better, who plan, exhort, badger, and scold. They try to use science to discredit traditional notions of religion and faith, but they speak the language of pluralism and spirituality to defend “nontraditional” beliefs.*

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