

V I E W P O I N T

Josef Joffe

The Lost Art of the Insult

Berlusconi should look to the old masters for a lesson in verbal combat

WHERE HAS THE FINE ART OF THE INSULT GONE? THERE WAS a time in Europe when the cutting gibe was a respected weapon in political discourse. Lady Astor, Winston Churchill's nemesis, once said to him: "If I were your wife I would put poison in your coffee." Churchill didn't demand an apology or file a human-rights complaint. He just shot back: "And if I were your husband I would drink it." But these days we get the insult without the art, and so we respond with self-righteous outrage. Last week, when a German Member of the European Parliament goaded Silvio Berlusconi about the immunity law he had passed in order to wriggle out of a bribery prosecution, the Italian Prime Minister cocked his head, pitched his voice high and replied in a classic commedia dell'arte style: "There is a man in Italy producing a film on the Nazi concentration camps. I would like to suggest you for the role of *Kapo*." Nobody laughed. The uproar was loud and immediate. German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder demanded an apology and Berlusconi, reluctantly, expressed his "regret"—but seemed to take it back the next day. "I did not make an apology," he said. "I spoke of my sadness over a comment that was interpreted badly."

We no longer live in Winston Land, but in the post-Auschwitz age. And so, in the catalog of epithets, "Nazi" trumps them all—the ghosts of the 55 million who died in World War II see to that. If a wise God were in charge of the world stage, he would decree: Thou shalt not exploit the memory of the Holocaust by using it for cheap political purposes. The label has become the universal atomic bomb of denigration, and you don't even have to be German to have it dropped on your head. Remember last fall, when one of Schröder's minions compared George W. Bush to Hitler? This riled the White House more than any of Schröder's anti-American antics on the campaign trail, and Herta and Paul Amirian, the Justice Minister who said it, was let go. Now it is Berlusconi, President of the European Union for the next six months, who has launched this verbal weapon of mass destruction, and it has, predictably, blown up in his face.

If the N word has become devalued by overuse, so has the currency of moral indignation. So when French Premier Jean-Pierre Raffarin told a gathering of center-right leaders in Strasbourg last week that his country would be heading straight for heaven if the Socialists hadn't trapped it in purgatory, all hell broke loose, so to speak. But unlike Berlusconi, who needed a full day to choke out

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his expression of regret, Raffarin quickly genuflected and the matter was dropped. Of course, Raffarin is not a threat to France's republican order as Berlusconi is to Italy's. The most sacred principle of republicanism, as first laid down in the U.S. Constitution of 1787, is the separation of powers between executive, legislature and judiciary. Berlusconi is the executive, dominates the legislature, and is relentlessly going after the judiciary. Nor is the Fourth Estate any safer. Most of the media is owned outright by Berlusconi, and his grip on the rest is so strong that even Italian state television's evening news show, *TG1*, dubbed over his remarks last week when it ran footage of him making his gaffe.

Berlusconi's usurpation of power is a serious political issue—one that catcalls and japes from the benches of the European Parliament won't solve. If the E.U.'s collective distaste was poured on Austria when a nasty little right-wing party entered the government, why not on Italy? Sure, *Bella Italia* is a lot bigger, and with its beauty and sheer cool, it can drink from a bottomless well of international affection. But precisely because we all love Italy so much, shouldn't Europe's leaders at least shake their heads and wag their fingers at the *Berlusconiisti*?

Of course they should, but postmodern man should also rediscover the art of the elegant rejoinder. Benjamin Disraeli, on the receiving end of an anti-Semitic slur in the British Parliament, had this to say: "Yes, I am a Jew, and when the ancestors of the Right Honorable Gentleman were brutal savages in an unknown island,

mine were priests in the Temple of Solomon." Thank God, anti-Semitic attacks are no longer acceptable discourse in Europe. When we really want to clobber someone, we call him a Nazi or compare him to Hitler. But that doesn't play so well, as Berlusconi and Däubler-Gmelin have learned. So here is a suggestion: If Continental politicians can't think up a suitable retort of their own, why not borrow a rapier from the arsenal of American wit? There's a classic from Congressman Thomas Brackett Reed in the late 19th century, who said of two rivals that they "never open their mouths without subtracting from the sum of human knowledge." If Berlusconi had trotted that one out, he would have heard as many laughs as catcalls, and *fine della storia*. But Disraeli, Churchill and Reed are dead, and so is the fine art of the insult.

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: GERARD CERLES—AFP (2); MARKUS SCHREIBER—AP

SAY WHAT? Berlusconi's bad joke, top, outraged E.U. parliamentarians, bottom right, and Schröder, bottom left