Forward

Here's exactly why it's dangerous to compare ICE to Nazis

If everything is Nazism, than nothing is

By ***Armin Langer*** *January 30, 2026*

An ICE patch and badge are seen on a Department of Homeland Security agent. *Photo by Jim Watson – Pool/Getty Images*

It may feel morally clarifying to compare ICE to Nazis in moments of outrage. But those comparisons are also historically inaccurate and politically counterproductive.

Nazism remains historically singular, both because of its eliminationist antisemitism and its state-driven project of industrial genocide. No other political movement has so entirely organized its worldview around the idea that a specific people constitutes a cosmic threat. The Nazis were driven by the belief that the mere existence of Jews endangered humanity, and that Jews therefore had to be physically annihilated everywhere.

A clear understanding of this truth has been absent amid renewed controversy over federal immigration enforcement and protests in Minneapolis. Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz compared children hiding in fear from ICE raids to Anne Frank

hiding in Amsterdam, in terror of capture by Nazi Germany. Former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich compared ICE operations under President Donald Trump's administration to the tactics of Hitler's Brownshirts. They have been joined by many others, including in this publication.

Learning from the Holocaust does not require declaring that everything is Nazism.
Comparison is a central tool of historical and political analysis, and Nazism can and should be compared to other ideologies. But flattening the particular contours of Nazism strips it of its distinctive genocidal logic, and risks pushing us to take the wrong messages from its horrors.

When Nazism becomes a general synonym for "bad politics," the Holocaust becomes a moral prop rather than a historically specific catastrophe. This is especially painful for Jews, but it also distorts the memory of the regime's many other victims: Roma and Sinti, people with disabilities, prisoners of war, queer people and political dissidents, among others.

Part of what drives these comparisons is cultural familiarity. The Holocaust and the Gestapo are widely understood shorthand for the worst imaginable abuses of state power. Invoking Nazi metaphors often says more about present anxieties — foremost among them the fear that the United States may be sliding toward authoritarianism — than about historical reality.

Those anxieties are profound, and legitimate, especially when it comes to the concerns about injustice toward immigrants. Federal immigration enforcement has long prompted alarm about the abuse of civil liberties, including concerns about racial profiling, excessive force, family separation and opaque chains of accountability.

These problems span multiple U.S. administrations, showing that vigilance and legal challenge are always necessary. Calling them "Gestapo tactics," however, as some national leaders have, obscures rather than clarifies the issue.

It conflates a flawed system operating within a still-robust framework of legal challenges and public scrutiny with a secret police apparatus designed for totalitarian control and genocide. For instance, in Minnesota, a federal judge threatened to hold the acting director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement in contempt for repeatedly defying court orders requiring bond hearings, prompting the agency to release a detainee. The fact that judges can and do continue to compel compliance, even amid sharp disputes over

enforcement, shows that the U.S. remains a democracy rather than a secret police state.

There are countries today in which opposition parties are banned, protest is routinely criminalized, courts are fully captured by the regime, and independent media are systematically dismantled — such as Russia, Iran or Venezuela. In those contexts, the language of secret police, one-party rule, and total state control describes concrete institutional realities.

It does not do so here. Yes, the U.S., like many countries today, is experiencing measurable democratic backsliding. But it remains far from an authoritarian regime. Much of the press remains free, despite significant pressure from the White House as well as structural pressures from corporate ownership, and continues to report extensively on immigration enforcement controversies. Independent courts have ruled against unlawful revocations of immigration protections. Protests in places like Minneapolis have mobilized large numbers of participants and, rather than being criminalized, are showing efficacy in getting the administration to change its course.

Learning from the Holocaust does not require declaring that everything is Nazism. Collapsing the distinction between democratic backsliding and full-fledged authoritarianism weakens our ability to diagnose what kind of political danger we are actually confronting. It might even weaken resistance: Mistaking slow erosion for a finished catastrophe can breed despair instead of motivating strategic action.

Nazi parallels also corrode political discourse itself. If ICE is the Gestapo, and Trump is Hitler, then Republican voters become Nazis by implication. This forecloses the possibility of democratic repair.

While far-right extremist currents undeniably exist within the MAGA movement, it is also a broad political camp that includes voters motivated by a variety of factors, including economic anxiety, distrust of elites and religious identity. Collapsing all of this into “Nazism” is analytically lazy and politically disastrous.

All that is on top of the risk of historical whitewashing that comes with this rhetoric. If every abuse is Nazism, then nothing is Nazism, and the lessons of the Holocaust — foremost among them the necessity of vigorously combatting antisemitism in our society — are lost.

Of course, supporters of Trump also engage in similar rhetoric, calling their own opponents Nazis. Ending this cycle of mutual Nazi-labeling is essential if the country hopes to move forward. Historical memory is a tool, not a weapon. We can confront injustice without exaggeration. And the best way to defend democracy is not to demonize our opponents, but rather to speak clearly, act responsibly, and work to build a political culture that can actually heal.

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