

Misuse of term 'genocide' makes for confusing politics

GUEST COMMENTARY

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The term "genocide" has been so frequently and casually misappropriated in our society that almost no one these days seems to know what the term actually means. Activists like to cry "genocide" whenever there is systematic discrimination against particular oppressed groups. We hear that certain forms of censorship are cultural genocide. Minority ethnic groups have called it genocide against blacks if the government makes abortion available to poor black women. And, of course, certain anti-abortion advocates have labeled abortion genocide against the unborn.

There are problems with misusing a term that has a very specific meaning in international law. Not only does it miseducate people about the facts and reality, but it dilutes meaning of term so that it

can scarcely be used to describe anything. Agreement on the meaning of key terms is crucial in facilitating dialogue on controversial moral issues. Obviously I am writing in the wake of the Genocide Awareness Project's demonstration last week; I am neither denying their right to express themselves as they like nor making an argument about whether late-term abortion is morally excusable. Rather I want to provide some information to students as citizens about what "genocide" actually is.

The 1948 Genocide Convention defined genocide as "any of the following acts carried out with the intent to destroy a national, religious, racial or ethnical group as such:

- 1) Killing members of the group,
- 2) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group,
- 3) Inflicting on the group conditions calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part,
- 4) Preventing births within the group,

5) Forcibly transferring children from the group to another group."

Whether or not this definition is broad enough has been debated by scholars of genocide for 50 years. Should "political groups" count, or were Stalin's purges not genocide? What counts as "bodily or mental harm"? How many group members need to be killed to count as genocide? All of this is subject to debate. But underlying all that, what constitutes genocide is the *intent to destroy the victim group*.

Providing abortion rights for poor blacks is not genocide against blacks because the purpose of the policy is not to deliberately destroy all blacks. Similarly, unless anti-abortionists argue that the purpose of abortion is to destroy all unborn children as a group, the analogy with the Holocaust doesn't seem to make sense.

It is possible that with enough semantic trickery one could make the opposite argument, but the argument should at least be discussed in the context of the Genocide Convention. What seems to be happening instead is that the

term "genocide" is being used to sensationalize political issues, without regard to truly educating people about the meaning of the terms.

The fact that the organization sponsoring the demonstration calls itself the "Genocide Awareness Project" is doubly misleading, implying that they want to make people aware of the nature of genocide. The real goal is the make people aware of abortion. Using the analogy of genocide does not serve this agenda — it only promotes backlash — and it misleads people about what genocide actually is.

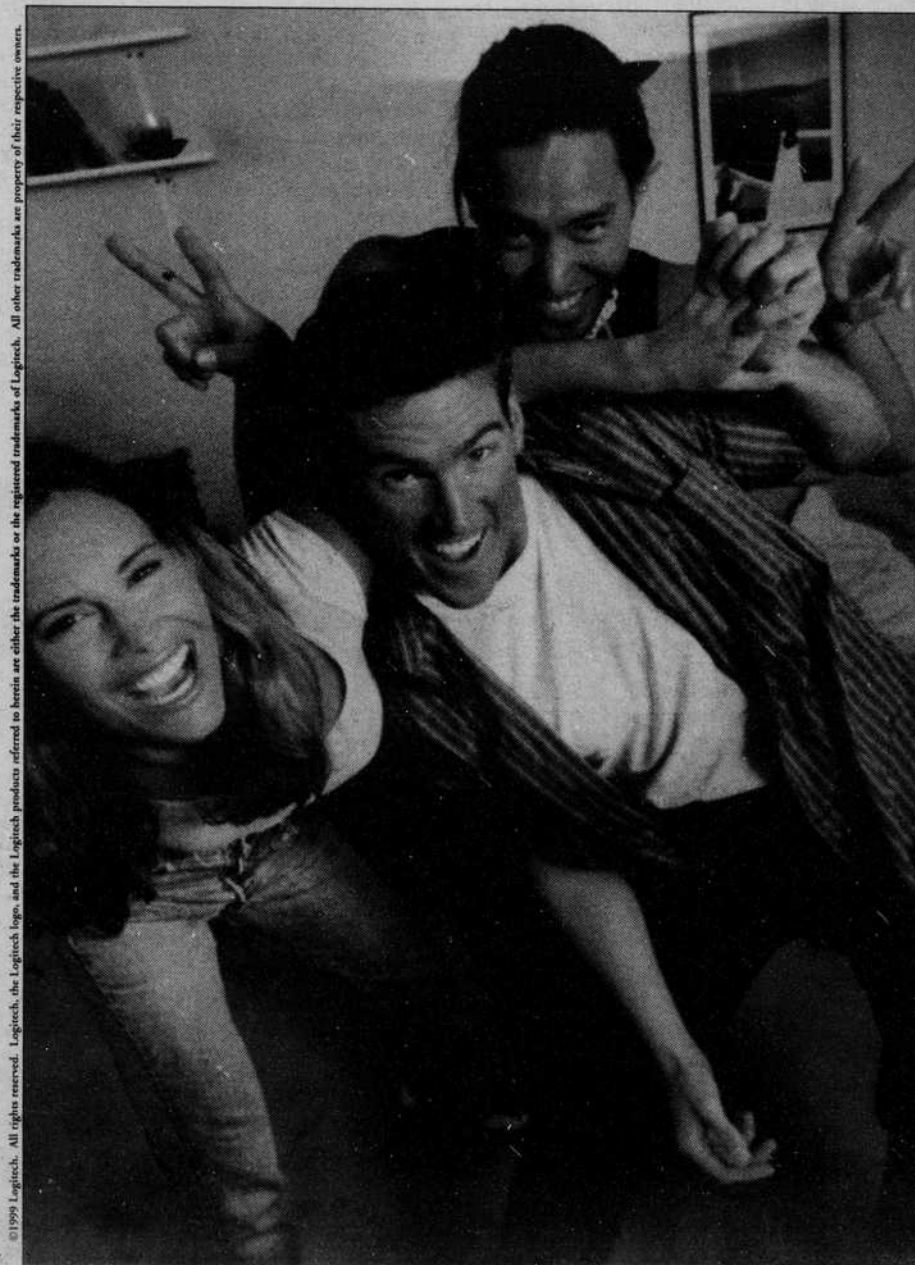
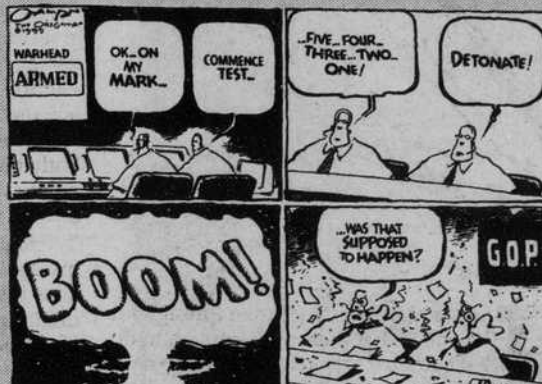
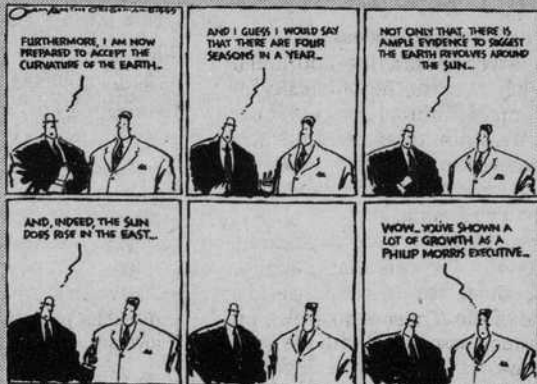
It also obscures the fundamental issue in regard to late-term abortion. We do not need to call late-term abortion *genocide* in order to argue that it is politically inconsistent with our understanding of human rights. (If it's not genocide, does that mean it's OK?) Lots of human rights offenses are not genocidal but are still in need of attention.

Images of chopped, burned and bleeding late-term fetuses should rightly invoke a political discus-

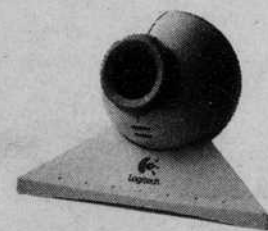
sion about the extent of *human rights* and dialogue about how to trade off between women's and children's human rights on the abortion issue. But none of that dialogue is possible when the demonstration serves not to invoke reason but to arouse emotion, not to educate with facts but to make a point with whatever analogies seem handy.

I encourage students as citizens to educate themselves about the facts, not the rhetoric, surrounding both issue of genocide and the issue of abortion. Is genocide an appropriate analogy? Make sure you understand what the term means first. And at the risk of speaking to a brick wall, I encourage staunch activists on both sides of the abortion issue to help foster thinking space for creating compromises, instead of creating misinformation that keeps the American public polarized.

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