

THE POLITICS OF THE HITLER MINISERIES

David K. Li of the *New York Post* had it just right when he observed last January that the Hitler miniseries, which aired May 18 and 20, “has been a public relations minefield for CBS.” From the time CBS announced it was going to do the movie, “Hitler: The Rise of Evil,” Jewish groups have been up in arms. Some questioned why it was necessary to do a TV portrait of Hitler while others wanted it squashed.

Before discussing the politics that colored the TV movie, it is worth noting that whenever the Catholic League has protested a play or movie it hasn’t seen (we typically have read the script), we have been blasted in the media for not waiting until we’ve seen it. But when Jewish groups protest a film they haven’t seen (nor a script that they’ve read), few entertainment critics carp. So much for fairness.

What Jewish groups feared most was the possibility that the movie might “humanize” Hitler. That is why they pressured CBS from the get-go: not until they were satisfied with the film would they back off. And they got what they wanted. The original script, met with disapproval, was scrapped altogether. A new screenwriter was hired and reliance on the Ian Kershaw biography of Hitler was scaled back. But this wasn’t all. CBS even went so far as to issue public service announcements during the telecast to promote tolerance. The network also made a generous donation to a Holocaust-related charity. These are the kinds of somersaults the networks are capable of doing. For some.

Consider how the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has approached the film. In July 2002, ADL national director Abraham Foxman questioned why there was a need for such a film, saying that “history has judged Hitler a monster.” “It’s distressing that

people would spend talent, time and money to make this man human," said Foxman. He then asked, "Why this rush to engage in this entertainment?"

Foxman not only questioned the wisdom of CBS doing a miniseries on Hitler, he questioned all such productions. "These are documentaries and films about Hitler the man, Hitler the lover, Hitler the young person," he said with disdain. "I find that trivializing and offensive," Foxman said.

In October 2002, ADL associate director Amy Levy chimed in by saying, "One has to wonder why there is a need for another movie about this man. Any new information that we can gauge on his childhood is not going to change the evil truth." To say she was frightened by this movie would be an understatement. Yet when the Catholic League complains about a show, we're told to lighten up—it's just a flick.

In December 2002, Foxman issued another public statement denouncing the movie. "Why the need or desire to make this monster human? The judgment of history is that he was evil, that he was responsible for millions of deaths." Again, no one branded him a censor.

But in the end, Foxman got what he wanted. The script was thoroughly rewritten, with an eye for suiting the ADL. On May 5, 2003, Foxman was able to say that the movie "teaches a significant lesson of history in a powerful way." Calling the portrayal of Hitler "brilliant," Foxman now was able to "commend CBS" for a job well done.

Foxman wasn't alone in his early objections to the film. Rabbi Marvin Hier, who heads the Simon Wiesenthal Center, expressed his concerns in September 2002. "The fear is," he said, "teenagers might say: 'He had a bad family life. It's not his fault. If they had taken him in art school, he wouldn't have been such a bad guy. He just got some bad breaks.'" In short, when it comes to portraying Hitler, all the environmental

reasons that help explain why someone acts the way he does should be carefully discarded.

Perhaps the biggest hypocrite of them all is *Newsday* TV critic Marvin Kitman. "I am so against this Hitler movie in advance," is what Kitman said last fall. "You just know what is going to happen. The only way TV can do criminals, sociopaths and monsters in its movies is to humanize them. No matter how evil a person, they all come out with a positive spin." He added, "I still don't think Adolf Hitler is ready for prime time." Perhaps he expects us to check in with him from time to time to see when, if ever, TV is ready for Hitler.

Kitman is the same guy who previously berated the Catholic League for protesting the ABC show "Nothing Sacred." In October 1997, he said the Catholic League didn't like the show because it portrayed the star, Father Ray, as "a priest with human failings." Not exactly. What we objected to was that Father Ray was a pro-abortion, hippie-dippie priest who engaged in violence, ripped off the poor and regularly defied Church teachings.

It should be noted that the Catholic League would sternly object to any portrayal of Hitler that would make him out to be anything but wholly responsible for his evil works. What we object to is the palpable double standard that is at work.