

# Referendum: Hitler's 'Democratic' Weapon To Forge Dictatorship

by Steve Douglas

Arnold Schwarzenegger's professed admiration for Adolf Hitler has assumed many manifestations since he became the "Governator" of California. One such is his brutal bullying of the state legislature; he clearly has little or no more regard for it, as a body of representative government, than Hitler had for the German Reichstag (parliament). Another such expression is Schwarzenegger's use of the referendum, as a way of bypassing that uncooperative legislature (see accompanying article). Arnold's populist, fascist, demagogic rants against "special interests" and "big government," together with his claim to represent the true interests of the "people," are very reminiscent of Hitler's carefully crafted polemics against "political insiders" and "self-serving political hacks" that put their petty interests above the interests of the people and the nation, which were directed at an increasingly economically and psychologically desperate German population between 1930 and 1933. Indeed, in the last 18 months before he was finally installed as Chancellor on Jan. 30, 1933, as his Nazi Party was making ever greater gains at the polls, Hitler sounded more like a 21st-Century Cheney-Bush neo-conservative than a 20th-Century gutter-scum anti-Semite intent upon mass murder and global war: He promoted "family values," "moral renewal," "military greatness," and "peace through strength," even as he bitterly attacked the Versailles Treaty, the League of Nations, and terrorists/Communists that threatened Germany's way of life, and "the politicians" who were too absorbed in their own special interests to address the needs of the nation.

Hitler was particularly harsh in his attacks on the Social Democratic Party (SPD) which was the largest party in Germany during most of the Weimar Republic, and the Catholic Center Party, which was frequently aligned with it. He denounced the Center Party's "political bosses" as "cowardly hypocrites" who operated under the "camouflage of Christianity," as they "poisoned and contaminated" the morals of the people. His 1932 election poster exhorted: "Catholics, save your Church! Christians, rescue the Christian idea of God! Smash the (Weimar/Versailles) System! Smash the Center Party, the Social Democracy, and thereby Bolshevism!" What righteous language from a Christian-hating, agnostic anti-Semite!

## The Chaos That Was Weimar

After Germany was defeated in World War I, the imperial government was disbanded, and the parliamentary system of the “Weimar Republic” was imposed in its place. The Treaty of Versailles which ended World War I, stipulated that Germany bore sole responsibility for the outbreak of the war; that it had to pay massive reparations of \$33 billion or 132 billion gold marks to the Allies; that the Rhineland had to be demilitarized; that the Saarland would be detached from Germany; that the German Army would be limited to 100,000 men; that the boundaries of Germany were redrawn, etc. In short, the draconian conditions of the Treaty virtually guaranteed the eruption of a new conflict.

Economic and financial chaos abounded. The German mark, which had been valued at 4 to the U.S. dollar in 1919, fell to 75 to the dollar in 1921, and 400 in 1922. By the beginning of 1923 it was 7,000 to the dollar; by July 1 it dropped to 160,000; by Aug. 1 it was 1 million; and by November it took 4 billion marks to buy 1 dollar! It was in the midst of that chaos, that the Nazis mounted an unsuccessful coup attempt in the German state of Bavaria in 1923. During his short stay in jail thereafter, Hitler resolved that his quest for dictatorial power would succeed, only insofar as he adhered to—or at least appeared to adhere to—legal means of political practice.

So it was, that Hitler’s Nazi Party embarked upon an electoral strategy that served to pave his road to power. In the Reichstag election of 1928, the Nazis garnered only 810,000 votes and 12 seats in the Reichstag. They were the ninth and smallest party in the nation, at that time. By way of comparison, the Communists won 3,265,000 votes and 54 seats in that election. But in September 1930, one year after the Wall Street stock market crash, one year into a deepening world depression, and after six months of brutal austerity and budget cutting by the regime of Chancellor Heinrich Brüning, the Nazis exploded onto the electoral scene. In that Reichstag election, Hitler’s minions received 6,409,600 votes and won 107 seats in the Reichstag, thereby becoming the nation’s second largest party.

As unemployment figures soared to over 6.5 million (or 25% of the workforce), and family incomes plunged by 40% relative to their 1929 levels, the Nazis made phenomenal gains in July 1932, when they won 13,745,000 votes and 230 seats in the Reichstag. At that point, the Nazis were the largest party, and the Social Democrats, with 133 seats, fell to the rank of the second.

As the number of Nazi deputies in the Reichstag grew, so did the Reichstag’s dysfunctionality. Between 1920 and 1930, the legislature met approximately 100 times per year. Between October 1930 and February 1931, the Reichstag met in 50 tumultuous sessions that were constantly disrupted by complementary and coordinated demonstrations conducted by the Nazis and their allegedly mortal enemies, the Communist Party deputies. That is, the same Hitler whose campaign

speeches denounced the “self-absorbed party hacks who were paralyzing government,” was directing his Nazi deputies to exacerbate that same paralysis. In February 1931, the Reichstag resolved to adjourn for six months, as the parties of the extreme right and left walked out in protest of rules changes that were designed to make it more difficult for them, or any party, to disrupt the functioning of the body as a whole. Between March 1931 and the next big election victory of the Nazis in July 1932, the Reichstag met only 24 times; and between August 1932 and Hitler’s installation as Chancellor on Jan. 30, 1933, it met only 3 times.

With regard to Hitler’s appointment by President Hindenburg as Chancellor, it must be remembered that it was not simply the Nazis’ showing at the polls that prompted the aging Field Marshal Hindenburg to make his fateful decision. In fact, he had sworn not long before, that he would never let “that Austrian corporal become Chancellor.” It was the conspiratorial actions, machinations, money, and political blackmail operations of Prescott Bush (Dubya’s grandfather), Montagu Norman of the Bank of England, Averell Harriman, and other leading lights of the Anglo-American establishment, that were decisive in forcing that “regime change” through.

## One-Party Dictatorship

Hitler immediately insisted upon new Reichstag elections, in the hope that his Nazi Party could secure an absolute majority. In the course of the campaign, Hermann Göring, Hitler’s top associate, designated successor, and head of the Prussian state police apparatus, secretly organized an arson attack against the Reichstag building on Feb. 27, and declared this to be proof of a Communist plot to overthrow the state. President Hindenburg signed the *Notverordnung*, empowering Hitler to rule by Emergency Decree. Still, even in that super-charged atmosphere of national emergency, when the Reichstag elections were held on March 5, the Nazis could secure only 44% of the vote.

Hitler convened the new Reichstag on March 21, 1933, expressly for the purpose of getting it to pass the *Ermächtigungsgesetz*—Enabling Law—that would grant him parliamentary approval to rule by emergency decree. The leaders of the (majority) non-Nazi and anti-Nazi party parliamentary factions foolishly agreed to “negotiate” with Hitler on this issue, in a deluded effort to “delimit” and “circumscribe” his emergency powers. Within days of the reconvening of the Reichstag, the Enabling Law was passed, and Hitler was affirmed as the “legal dictator” of Germany, while still nominally serving at the behest of the President. Within less than four months, every party which had “negotiated” the Enabling Law with Hitler was either banned, or “voluntarily dissolved.” On July 14, 1933, Germany formally became a one-party dictatorship, when Hitler decreed the law which stated:

“The National Socialist German Workers’ Party constitutes the only political party in Germany.



Hitler's election campaign posters in 1932. His populist attacks on "political bosses" and "special interests," and his use of the referendum to bypass the legislature, sound very familiar to current California residents.

"Whoever undertakes to maintain the organizational structure of another political party or to form a new political party will be punished with penal servitude up to three years or with imprisonment of from six months to three years, if the deed is not subject to a greater penalty according to other regulations."

Hitler finally had the absolute majority in the Reichstag which he had so desperately craved. What did he do with it? The Reichstag proceeded to meet only 12 (!) times between March 1933 and Sept. 1, 1939, when Hitler precipitated the outbreak of World War II with his attack on Poland. It enacted only four laws during that entire period; it conducted no debates, and never heard speeches made by anyone except Hitler.

The Reichstag really outdid itself, however, on April 26, 1942, when, less than six months after Hitler had declared war on the United States, and less than one year after he had attacked the Soviet Union, it gave the *Führer* absolute power of life and death over every German, and simply suspended all laws which might stand in the way of that:

In the present war, in which the German people are faced with a struggle for their existence or their annihilation, the *Führer* must have all the rights postulated by him which serve to further or achieve victory. Therefore—without being bound by existing legal regulations—in his capacity as Leader of the nation, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, Head of Government and supreme executive chief, as Supreme Justice and Leader of the Party—the *Führer* must be in a position to force with all means at his disposal every German, if

necessary, whether he be common soldier or officer, low or high official or judge, leading or subordinate official of the party, worker or employer—to fulfill his duties. In case of violation of these duties, the *Führer* is entitled after conscientious examination, regardless of so-called well-deserved rights, to mete out due punishment and to remove the offender from his post, rank, and position without introducing prescribed procedures.

How Dick Cheney, George Bush, and Arnold Schwarzenegger must be green with Reichstag envy!

### Hitler's Plebiscites

It was in that overall political and strategic context that Hitler conducted his plebiscites, or referendums. He used these as a way of maintaining the illusion that democratic processes were still at work in Germany, when, in reality, a one-party dictatorship and police state prevailed. The plebiscites also provided an avenue through which Hitler could cement his psychological and emotional bond with the population, by mobilizing them around single issues. A plebiscite or referendum is, by definition, a yes or no vote, on a single issue. In that respect, it is "democracy" made to order for the mob. In a referendum, people aren't encouraged to think through complex, interrelated problems, or judge the character and cognitive capabilities of a number of candidates competing for an office in a representative government: They are incited to vote "yes or no" on a particular issue. Thus, it is not surprising that plebiscites were a preferred form of political practice in the Roman Empire. In fact, a form of plebiscite

was practiced daily in the Roman Coliseum, as the spectators/mob would signal “thumbs up” or “thumbs down”—“yes or no”—to help determine whether Christians or gladiators would live or die after combat. Nor is it surprising that it was the fascist dictator and Caesar-worshipping Napoleon who revived the use of the plebiscite in modern times, when he had himself confirmed as First Consul in France on Feb. 7, 1800. On that remarkable democratic occasion, 3,011,007 French voters said “yes” to Napoleon becoming their new ruler (dictator), and 562 said “no.”

Hitler did not enjoy quite the level of “support” that Napoleon marshalled, but he came close. There were four major referendums that Hitler conducted. The first was on Nov. 12, 1933, in which the German people were called upon to ratify Hitler’s decision to withdraw from the Geneva Disarmament Conference and the League of Nations. Ninety-six percent of registered voters turned out to vote, and 95% of them ratified the withdrawal. It was even reported, that 2,154 of 2,242 inmates at the Dachau concentration camp voted “yes” to withdrawal!

The second referendum was held on Aug. 19, 1934, wherein the subject was the ratification of Hitler’s (illegal) usurpation of power, as Führer/Chancellor, in the aftermath of President Hindenburg’s death. Ninety-five percent of the registered voters went to the polls, and 90% of them (over 38 million people), voted “yes.” This, of course, was a radically different result than Hitler had achieved 18 months earlier, when, running against other parties, his Nazis received only 17,077,180 votes, or 44% of the total votes cast. Hitler’s vastly higher vote was attributable, at least in significant part, to the fact that *he was not running against any opposition*, as his Nazis had been on March 5, 1933: A referendum does not mandate, require, or even necessarily allow for an organized political opposition—it simply requires a “yes or no” answer to a single question. That is why both Napoleon and Hitler were so enamored of them.

The third plebiscite was held on March 29, 1936, for the purpose of ratifying Hitler’s military occupation of the Rhineland, which, according to the Treaty of Versailles, was to have remained demilitarized. Ninety-nine percent of registered voters went to the polls, and 98.8% voted “yes” to the occupation.

The fourth plebiscite was held on April 10, 1938, in order to ratify Hitler’s *Anschluss*, or annexation of Austria. Over 99% of registered voters voted “yes” on that question.

It is no wonder why Hitler preferred plebiscites. What is Arnold Schwarzenegger’s excuse?

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