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Obama, The Fallen Messiah and The Problem With Secular Salvation Narratives

By [Max Blumenthal](#) - December 16, 2009, 8:10PM

In responding to my initial post, Sarah Posner, Todd Gitlin, and Fred Clarkson make some very important points about the appeal of the Christian right to ordinary Americans. I think their points dovetail with one another. Posner argues quite correctly that those who I described as giving up their individual freedom for the authoritarian structure of the right believe they are gaining new life in the Kingdom of God, along with a sense of community and belonging. She illustrates this trend in her excellent book on the rising trend of prosperity gospel theology in evangelical churches, [God's Profits](#).

Clarkson adds that the salvation narrative the movement offers to trauma-wracked individuals is one of its key draws. This narrative often takes an explicitly political form, promising the replacement of a culturally decadent secular government with a theocratically-inspired authoritarian system (see Newt Gingrich's [remarks](#) at David Horowitz's Renaissance Weeknd for a recent example of this appeal). Or, as Gitlin said, the salvation narrative may promise eternal life in Heaven -- after the enemies of God are slaughtered en masse in a display of pornographic violence, as portrayed in Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' bestselling Left Behind Series.

During a time of economic decline, persistent cultural strife, deepening American involvement in far-off military conflicts, and rapid environmental deterioration, is there any wonder that some have turned to apocalyptic salvation narratives promising both a transcendent, everlasting future and violent retribution against perceived evildoers? A 2002 CNN poll found that 59% of Americans believe that the prophecies in the Book of Revelations will come true. The startling number reflected the still-fresh trauma of the 9/11 attacks, but I suspect that it has held steady, if not risen. Indeed, mainstream American culture is permeated by apocalypticism; the blockbuster movie hit 2012 is but one recent example.

I spend several chapters in my book following the Christian right's ascent to the mountain top with George W. Bush's re-election, detailing how the movement shrouded science and reason in the shadow of the cross, then observing as it swiftly imploded during the Terri Schiavo charade. Because I completed my book days after Barack Obama's inauguration, I was only able to foreshadow the right's plan to undermine the new president. Having watched the right attempt to delegitimize and literally overthrow Bill Clinton for eight years, I did not harbor any illusions about Obama transcending partisan division by becoming the ["liberal Rescuer who can reunite America,"](#) as many argued.

What I did not include in my book was any sense of where the Democratic left was going, or how this movement had developed its own salvation narrative during the Bush era. Only a presidency as destructive and radical as Bush's could have produced such deep levels of anxiety and desperation among progressives. When the Democratic primary began, some progressives seemed to ache for a secular messiah to descend from the political heavens, reverse Bush's disastrous legacy and save the country from itself.

In their quest for a savior, progressives discovered Barack Obama. "I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views," Obama proclaimed in his book, *The Audacity of Hope*. As Obama's primary battle against Hillary Clinton intensified, his rhetoric and the language of his supporters grew increasingly messianic. At a rally in South Carolina, Oprah Winfrey referred to Obama as "The One," a fusion of Jesus and Neo from *The Matrix*. When Obama defeated Clinton in Iowa, he quoted from a Hopi Indian End Times prophecy that had become popular among New Agers: ["We are the ones we've been waiting for."](#) Moved to the point of ecstasy by Obama's victory speech, Ezra Klein declared the candidate, "not the Word made flesh, but the triumph of the word over flesh... Obama is, at his best, able to call us back to our higher selves."

(Though he is not a progressive by even the wildest stretch of the imagination, it is worth noting that Louis Farrakhan, who had consistently ordered his followers to boycott elections and who attacked black politicians from Harold Washington to Jesse Jackson as tools of the white power structure, [declared](#) in no uncertain terms that Obama was the Messiah.)

Now that some of Obama's most zealous supporters are beginning to express grave doubts about his ability to deliver the transcendent change he promised, I think it is time for them to consider their role in contributing to the problems Obama faces with both his Democratic base and his opponents on the right. They embraced a secular salvation narrative that Obama cleverly channeled to excite them and distract from his lack of progressive accomplishments. In the end, Obama's

messianization created false expectations while establishing political space for the right to undermine and delegitimize him.

To be sure, Obama's salvation narrative was dramatically different than the dualistic, malignant version that prevails on the Christian right. Obama never, to my knowledge, played to his supporters' dark sides by promising them holy retribution against their perceived enemies. In fact, part of his appeal stemmed from his repudiation of partisan rancor -- there were no red states where people reject science, demonize gays and attack minority rights. Until he was inaugurated, Obama behaved like a secular Messiah in a world without a Devil.

In my book, I detail a series of experiments by a group of political psychologists seeking to provide evidence that the fear of death inspires extreme conservative beliefs -- including apocalypticism. Their study was inspired by a theory of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker: "The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity - designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of man." The professors discovered that time and again, their study subjects would register more conservative responses to questions if they were first reminded of their own deaths. (See John Judis' excellent [article](#) on the studies for more).

The use of mortality reminders came in to play as soon as Obama was inaugurated. Almost immediately, the right attempted to delegitimize him by reversing the phenomenon he relied on to win: While he attempted to serve as a blank screen for Americans to project their aspirations upon, they projected their most fearsome inner demons onto him. During the October McCain-Palin rallies, Sarah Palin and far-right surrogates like Joe the Plumber attacked Obama as an Other, a strange outsider who did not share mainstream American values. Their intention was to make him as unfamiliar and frightening as possible, and in doing so, to scare off wavering independent voters. By this time, it was too late in the campaign for the tactic to take effect, so it extended into this year and peaked during the Fall Teabagger rallies and town hall disruptions.

Teabagger activists transposed images of Stalin and Hitler onto Obama's face. (Their propaganda bore a disturbing resemblance to the signs waved by right-wing Jewish settlers during rallies against Yitzhak Rabin that depicted the soon to be assassinated Israeli PM in Nazi SS garb and as the collaborator Marshall Petain, two seemingly incongruous images). Obama was a Muslim; Obama was a commie; Obama was a cosmopolitan globalist; Obama was a black nationalist. It did not matter who Obama really was. The right simply wanted to convince America he was The Other. As cynical as their tactic is, it has damaged Obama in large part because he offered himself up as "a blank screen," defining himself as he thought different audiences wished to see him, and ultimately not establishing a very clear identity at all. The right has complemented its anti-Obama propaganda with false rumors designed to inject the language of death into the healthcare debate. The single most damaging rumor, adopted from the cult of Lyndon LaRouche, refined by healthcare industry lobbyist Betsy McCaughey, and popularized by Sarah Palin, was that Obama's healthcare reform proposal included a plan to implement "death panels." While the president pleaded for compromise and reason, the right repeated the baseless charge over and over that he planned to pull the plug on grandma, euthanize the severely handicapped, and kill the sick. Obama has not yet recovered from the damage the right's mortality reminders did to his political standing.

Since Obama announced his plan to escalate the war in Afghanistan, and with the White House apparently poised to scrap the public option and Medicare buy-in proposals to mollify Sen. Joseph Lieberman, the progressive left is going into contortions. Turn on MSNBC or read any major progressive blog and you will see former Obama zealots proclaim, "Kill the bill!" while assailing the president as an empty suit.

The liberal left has become so disgruntled that a leading conservative talk radio host asked me recently if progressives were considering a primary challenge to Obama. I laughed and stated my belief that despite his troubles, Obama would win a second term. Whether or not that happens, those former Obama fanatics experiencing a crisis in faith should look in the mirror. They demanded a secular salvation narrative and participated in the near-deification of the politician who so eloquently delivered it to them. They now know that Obama is just a politician. What they have refused to acknowledge is that he would not have fallen so hard had they not lifted him so high.