

American Political Witchcraft

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by Charles Strohmer

Apparently, the politics of fear is no longer a strong enough brew for my country. From sea to shining seas, spells are now being spun over the presidential primaries and the up-coming 2012 presidential race that resemble a form of political witchcraft. The hard-hitting divisive rhetoric of recent years that reflected legitimate fundamental differences between Democrats and Republicans has yielded to a pernicious manipulation that craves control of the American presidency. How could this happen? And why are some leading Evangelicals being implicated in it?

Let's start with the panic surrounding the national worldview crisis triggered by nineteen men aboard four aircraft the morning of September 11, 2001. The response from Washington was to set in motion a 'be afraid, be very afraid' manipulation of U.S. domestic and foreign policy. Congress accepted direction from a hard-nosed Republican White House that had been stocked with high-level neoconservative advisors, whose fear-mongering Middle East agenda ended up being promoted by well-respected figures. 'We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud,' President Bush's National Security Adviser, Dr. Condoleezza Rice, told CNN's Wolf Blitzer, making headlines around the world about the administration's looming war in Iraq. Just months later, Secretary of State Colin Powell's cleverly orchestrated power point performance at the UN capitalized further on manufactured fears and stamped Washington's imprimatur on the war, launched just weeks later.

Politicians, or course, may seek to push their policies through by manipulating or manufacturing public fears, but after 9/11 the political stakes were higher than ever before. By the end of 2003, the policies of fear were becoming clear. A perpetual war on global terrorism. Special renditions. Torture. Abuse of the U.S. Constitution. The creation of a surveillance state, which today employs nearly a million people at 1,900 private companies and 1,300 federal organizations around the country. And then in November 2004 George W. Bush, with large Evangelical constituencies still loyal, was reelected.

Demonizing Obama

Flash forward to the election of Barack Obama. A liberal Democrat with a conciliatory approach, Obama trounced his conservative Republican challenger, Senator John McCain, as a critical mass of Americans voted to say 'Enough!' to the politics of fear. By his inauguration, however, President Obama had inherited leadership of a nation jeopardized in its foreign policy and crippled economically at home. Everyone knew there would be no quick fixes, whoever was the president, and a large majority of Americans now hoped that the two parties would pool their considerable resources to seek wisdom together for solutions to the country's foreign and domestic ills. It was not to be.

Having become ritual experts at the politics of fear as a control mechanism, widely listened-to television and talk radio ideologues on the political right refused to give the new president any quarter. With individual audiences that run well into the multi-millions everyday, they immediately began blaming Obama for the nation's every ill and then ramped up the level of enmity on the airwaves, or in best-sellers, calling the president a Marxist, a Nazi, a communist, the messiah, the enemy, and worst of all a Muslim. All of these epithets are now widely circulating coins of the realm.

A Democratic Mob?

In her new book, *Demonic: How the Liberal Mob is Endangering America*, far right icon Ann Coulter has ended any guessing about what the far right is spinning. Coulter has written several #1 New York Times bestsellers that have verged on the demonization of Democrats, liberals, and the Left that *Demonic* now makes overt. In the book, she weaves all three broad categories of Americans (she makes little distinction between the three) into the tradition of Stalin, Hitler, and the guillotine (her shorthand for the French Revolution, which occupies many pages of the book). Mob rule and political violence is always a Democrat affair, she writes, while Republicans and conservatives stand for peaceable order. Large and influential blocs of conservative and liberal Evangelicals are now at the beck and call of political irrationalism.

Chapter one of *Demonic* opens by quoting Mark 5:2-9, surely one of the eeriest episodes in the Bible. Jesus meets a man possessed by many demons who, being uncontrollably violent and destructive, has been exiled and is living in a cemetery. Coulter immediately expounds the meaning: 'The demon is a mob. The mob is demonic.... The Democratic Party is the party of the mob.... Democrats ...

are the mob? (her emphasis). The rest of the book trots out a litany of ploys accusing Democrats of every sin in the book that Republicans themselves are also guilty of. But Coulter doesn't think Republicans are guilty of anything. To her, they are without sin and therefore the political saviors of America.

In the dark chapter titled "Lucifer: The Ultimate Mob Boss" (it concludes the book), Coulter, expounding John 8:44, writes: "The mob is Satanic, and Satan can only destroy." And for the legion of readers who may be with her to the end, her closing words hint at violence. After citing historical examples of famous rebellions violently crushed, she writes: "A mob cannot be reasoned with; it can only be smashed."

America's Taliban?

Some on the Left are spinning in kind, demonizing the Right. In July, an opinion piece by Paul Rosenberg, titled "America's Own Taliban," ran in Al Jazeera about Texas governor Rick Perry, now a well-funded candidate in the Republican primaries for president. The article implicates Perry in "a fast growing right-wing politico-religious presence [with] plans to implement an end-times, Christian theocracy in the US." As his support for this, Rosenberg sees Perry as cozying up to "dominionist" Christian leaders who have become political activists with national prayer groups in the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) who want Perry in the White House in 2012. Evangelical leader C. Peter Wagner, whom Rosenberg calls the intellectual godfather of the NAR, is also implicated in the plot. Rosenberg concludes by chiding American journalists for not doing their due diligence about this "Taliban-like" movement in right wing Christian America.

Apparently, it worked. In August, The New Yorker ran a lengthy hit piece, "Leap of Faith," by Ryan Lizza, on Tea Party favorite Michele Bachmann, a Congresswoman from Minnesota who during the summer was the frontrunner in the Republican primaries. Bachmann told Lizza that Total Truth, a noted worldview book by Evangelical intellectual Nancy Pearcey, was a major influence on her thinking. Lizza then distorted Pearcey's tutelage under theologian Francis Schaefer, whom Lizza mistakenly identified as a leading proponent of "Dominionism," confusing him in the article with reconstructionist thinker Rousas John Rushdoony. Anyone who has read Schaeffer or studied at a L'Abri center knows how patently ridiculous Lizza's claim is. But journalism spun in service to a political agenda is nothing new.

It's in the Air

Also in August, Rachel Tabachnick, an independent researcher who has made a name for herself with her blog "NARWatch," was interviewed on Fresh Air, an hour-long left-of-center radio journalism show that draws millions of thoughtful listeners at lunchtime every weekday. During the interview, Tabachnick discussed a huge prayer rally in Texas that had been recently held for and attended by guest of honor Rick Perry. It was sponsored in part by NAR groups that have a political agenda dedicated to "the Seven Mountains campaign," which Tabachnick believes is a dominionist strategy for getting control of American business, government, the media, arts and entertainment, educations, the family, and religion. Pressed to explain, she engaged in a technical explanation of her understanding of "strategic-level spiritual warfare" practiced by some groups in the NAR to exorcise American government of demonic influences.

One can only image what secular listeners in Manhattan and San Francisco were thinking over their foie gras or pelmeni. Hopefully they were also listening in October when Fresh Air interviewed C. Peter Wagner, who corrected misconceptions while admitting that, yes, spiritual warfare goes on, adding that he would like to see more "kingdom-minded believers" influencing the seven mountains with justice, peace, and righteousness, and making clear that he respects other religions and supports America's democratic political system.

The Irony and Tragedy of Political Control

In America, political ideologues on the radio, the television, in the press, and on the Web have been able to gain the loyalty of large and influential blocs of conservative and liberal Evangelicals, who are now at the beck and call of their political irrationalism, making it impossible to predict how the Evangelical vote will influence the 2012 presidential elections. Things are so strange that on the Democrat side, it has even been subtly suggested by some pundits that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton should challenge Obama for the Democrat presidential nomination or at least run as his vice-president. Jesus rebuked the mantle of political control offered to him. Evangelicals should go and do likewise.

A couple things can be said, however. One is that America, like Europe, is negotiating a very tough period in its pluralist experiment "in which human diversity is normative, cooperation is essential, and human flourishing is desired" but its potential is being

undermined by absolutized ideological interests promoting their sectarian agendas. If left unchecked it can lead to policies of domestic violence, with ideologues and constituencies like Coulter's apparently consenting. American Evangelicals need to call a time-out. They need to think, and think seriously, about just what it is they may be supporting, because the other thing is this.

Defeat often comes in ways unexpected. It is not success at the polls that should concern Christians. It is the defeat they will inevitably suffer if political 'success' (read: control) is gained by their implicit or explicit support of the toxic manipulation that is seeking control of the American presidency. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus, tempted by the devil, rebukes the mantle of political control that was being offered to him. American Evangelicals can help to end the spell to control American politics by likewise rebuking the offer.

Practically, this will mean pulling together for the common good and working together across party lines to develop wisdom-based, rather than sectarian, approaches for addressing America's domestic and foreign problems. And this will require civil voices winning the day in the public square. America's Evangelicals can contribute to this.

A variety of impressive Declarations launched in recent years, but now gone cold, are already in place for this. A wide range of prominent progressive and conservative Christians have publicly pledged themselves to promote civil, wisdom-based dialogue across party lines to find answers surrounding fundamental differences that hinder advancing the common good. These initiatives include 'An Evangelical Manifesto,' the 'Matthew 5:21-26 Project,' the 'Manhattan Declaration,' and 'A Covenant for Civility.'

Let these leaders employ their considerable resources to rally their large constituencies on the left and the right around this principled pluralism, and let it begin by saying 'Enough is enough!' to the spin.

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