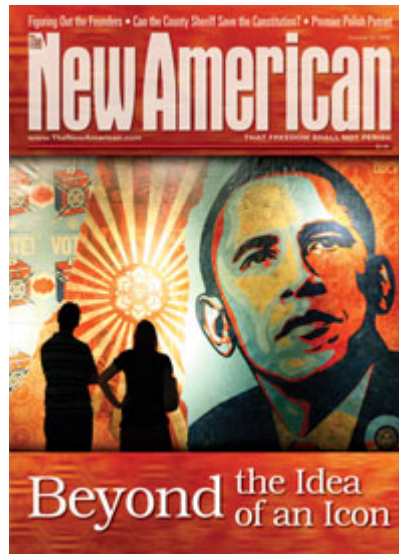




Obama: Beyond the Idea of an Icon

There has long been a certain objection to the divine command that we should worship God. It is simply: Why does God need you to worship Him? It is, really, an eminently fair question, and it has an eminently logical answer: God doesn't need you to worship Him. You need to worship Him.

Worshipping God has, among other things, the very great by-product of reminding us who God is and, by extension, who He is not: us. This may seem obvious, but history has shown that this simple fact more often than not eludes man. For instance, Egyptian pharaohs were considered very important gods in their culture; in 44 B.C., Julius Caesar erected a statue of himself with the inscription, "The unvanquished god"; and in the mid 2200s B.C., King Narim-Sin of the Akkadian Empire was known as "the god of Agade."



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But today, in the United States, most feel very much removed from such things. Why, our first president, George Washington, not only wouldn't deify himself, he wouldn't even accept an offer of kingship. Yet, also today, we see something very different. We see a man being referred to as "the messiah" and "the One," a man around whom a seemingly unprecedented cult of personality has arisen. That man is, of course, Barack Obama.

Fathoming the Fear

Whether you consider these deific characterizations more the work of Obama's enemies or his friends, certainly they explain much of the fear evoked by his administration. And those fears were recently stoked again by an event, the September 8 back-to-school speech he gave to America's schoolchildren. In fact, the opposition to the talk was so intense that most schools made viewing of the speech optional. And many others simply refused to air it. Among these were school districts in northern Texas and even a dozen of them in Obama's home state of Illinois.

Of course, there were a few plain vanilla reasons for the great controversy surrounding it. There was that good old-fashioned partisanship, the kind that made the Left apoplectic over George H.W. Bush's speech to youth in 1991. There were also specific defects in the speech, such as when Obama was appealing to students to do their part to improve education and said, "I'm working hard to fix up your classrooms and get you the books, equipment and computers you need to learn." While this seems innocuous enough, it serves to cement a certain misconception about the federal government and its chief executive's role: under our Constitution, the president certainly has a right to use his bully pulpit to inspire the people, and localities certainly have a right to broadcast a presidential speech to their



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students, but the federal government simply has no legitimate role in providing equipment and supplies for schools. Of course, somebody sympathetic to Obama might aver that he was simply trying to appeal to kids by emphasizing that he is “doing his part.” But the point is that it is not his part — it’s the tearing apart of our nation’s governmental balance of power.

Yet, the scope of the negative reaction to the speech is not explained by such defects. In point of fact, traditionalists would agree with much of its substance, as Obama stressed accountability, warning students that all was for naught unless they studied hard and listened to authority figures. Rather, what apparently raised alarm were the lesson plans initially meant to accompany the speech (which, owing to the controversy, were later revised). They involved having students write letters to themselves, explaining how they could “help the president,” and the materials asked questions such as “What is the president trying to tell me?” “What is the president asking me to do?” and “What is President Obama inspiring you to do?” The president-this, the president-that ... it again smacks of that cult of personality. In fact, one gets the feeling that if Obama had a version of a certain famous John F. Kennedy line, it would be, “Ask not what your president can do for you; ask what you can do for your president.”

Even this, though, doesn’t fully explain the spasm of anxiety induced by his speech. After all, while such a focus on the chief executive would always inspire criticism, it could be chalked up to a misstep by the Department of Education (which issued the lesson plans) or, at worst, a self-centeredness not at all unknown in politicians. But with Barack Obama, the focus is often viewed quite differently. Remember that this is the man who had transfixed youth like no president in memory, bringing them to the polls like a piper; the man at whose feet people would faint at campaign rallies as if they were slain in the spirit; the man who, unlike any president before, was described in messianic terms.

Yet, are those who fear Obama just paranoid?

Doting or Deification?

His defenders would point out that labels such as “the One” and “the messiah” are often applied to him mockingly by his opponents, and this is true. But we also have to ask where this idea of Obama as godhead came from. After all, Bill Clinton was a reviled leftist president who was hounded (and deservedly so) by adversaries, but — although his playboy persona should never have overshadowed his destructive policies — he was more likely to have been labeled the “the Libidinous One.” The answer is that Obama’s enemies didn’t make up the messiah image out of whole cloth. For instance, Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan said about then-Senator Obama, “When the messiah speaks, the youth will absolutely hear. And the messiah is absolutely speaking.” Of course, the obvious response is: with friends like Farrakhan, who needs enemies? Yet such sentiments aren’t limited to those who believe in “mother ships” and numerology. The first dean of the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel, Morehouse College religion professor Lawrence Carter, said, “No one saw him coming, and Christians believe God comes at us from strange angles and places we don’t expect, like Jesus being born in a manger.” Pundit Chris Matthews, describing his feelings toward Obama, was giddy as a schoolgirl with a crush and gushed, “This is the New Testament. I felt this thrill going up my leg.” Then, just recently I met a dentist at a social function who told me that he once asked a patient what she thought of Obama. Her response? Among other things she said, “He’s the messiah.” And if a February Harris Poll is any indication, she does not prostrate alone. It asked Americans to name their hero (not their zero), and Obama came in first — ahead of Jesus Christ — who occupied the second spot. Clearly, it seems that the characterization of Obama as messiah is inspired not by paranoia but a negative metanoia.

Also note that man’s nature doesn’t change, and because of this we needn’t reach back through the



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mists of antiquity to find the deification of leaders. And a mere hop, skip, and jump back in time takes us to the most notorious modern case, the man who seemed to want to be regarded a god but ultimately convinced most he was the devil, Adolf Hitler. I illustrated in the TNA piece “Hitler and Christianity” (June 9, 2008 issue) how the Nazi leader had a well-defined plan to destroy Christianity but certainly didn’t intend to leave a void. Instead, he was in the process of establishing a type of neo-paganism with himself as its godhead. Then, even more contemporary but no less devilish is “Dear Leader” Kim Jong-Il of North Korea, the god wannabe with a taste for Hennessy, blonde women, and the bomb. As Robert Marquand writes in the *Christian Science Monitor’s* “N. Korea escalates ‘cult of Kim’ to counter West’s influence,” “North Koreans are taught to worship Kim Jong Il as a god.... The North exerts extraordinary control through deification.... [A Kim-family deification budget] pays for ideology schools, some 30,000 Kim monuments, gymnastic festivals, films and books, billboards and murals, 40,000 ‘research institutes,’ historical sites, rock carvings, circus theaters, training programs, and other worship events.” Unfortunately for the North Koreans, however, Kim does not possess the godlike ability to wave his hand and make these things miraculously appear. Instead he spends almost 40 percent of the starving nation’s budget on them.

So we’ve seen examples of man deifying himself 4,000, 2,000, and 70 years ago, and in our time, but what about our place? Could such a thing really happen in America, the home of “rugged individualism”? Well, not only are we descending into effete collectivism, we also receive no special dispensation from the laws governing man. And, most significantly, we see the symptoms, such as the presidency taking on a more godlike role as time marches on. No man can ever be omnipresent, but the president is ever more present in our lives year by year; no man can ever be all-powerful, but the president is ever more powerful with time’s passage. As Gene Healy wrote in his book *The Cult of the Presidency*:

The chief executive of the United States is no longer a mere constitutional officer charged with faithful execution of the laws. He is a soul nourisher, a hope giver, a living American talisman against hurricanes, terrorism, economic downturns, and spiritual malaise. He ... is the one who answers the phone at 3 a.m. to keep our children safe from harm. The modern president is America’s shrink, a social worker, our very own national talk show host. He’s also the Supreme Warlord of the Earth.

It’s true. The president’s role expands as people clamor for him to reach for the heavens, blithely unaware that the only taste of the supernatural government can offer is a glimpse of Hell.

Pledging to the President

And it seems this expanded presidential role may now be accompanied by an expanded president’s ego and expanded peasant mentality. For example, there was a recent Harpo Productions video featuring Hollywood types such as Ashton Kutcher that was shown in at least one elementary school. In it they ask viewers to make a humanitarian pledge, and two of theirs are “to be of service to Barack Obama” and “to be a servant to our president ... and all mankind.” The last was toward the end, and it was followed by something truly eerie. Sounding like brainwashed cult members or Borg-like, mind-controlled cogs in a futuristic science fiction movie, all the actors said in unison, “Because together we can, together we are, and together we will be the change that we seek.” Whatever happened to just pledging allegiance to the flag? Even the Hitler Youth’s pledge of allegiance was to the leader *and* the flag.

Speaking of youth, another video, one taken at a Missouri government school, surfaced prior to the



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election. It featured young black teenagers marching like soldiers, dressed identically and wearing fatigue pants, and announcing military style what Obama inspired them to do and what he would bestow upon the nation. The video opened with them chanting “alpha, omega, alpha, omega...,” which could remind one of how “the Alpha and the Omega” is an appellation of God in the Book of Revelation. Truly eerie, though, was the “Sing for Change” video, featuring a bevy of fresh-faced children in the five- to 12-year-old age range, in training, apparently, to be Akkadians. The homage opens with a little girl missing some baby teeth singing, “We’re gonna spread happiness; we’re gonna spread freedom. Obama’s gonna change it; Obama’s gonna lead ‘em.” It closes with a chorus of “Yes, we can-can; yes, we can-can...” Yes, we can ... compete with the North Koreans, it appears. Isn’t this just a bit too reminiscent of how children venerated Hitler in song in the 1930s and how children do the same for Kim Jong-Il today? Doesn’t it strike a bit too close to a place that shouldn’t at all seem like home?

All this is alarming to many, yet others will just roll their eyes. They may say, “You’ve thoroughly ‘Godwinned’ yourself, Duke. How can you compare Obama to Hitler?” Yet, in this way of thinking, it also could be said that I’m comparing the president to King Narim-Sin of Akkad, Julius Caesar, ancient pharaohs, or any of a thousand kings who would have been God. You could also say that I’m drawing some equivalency between all those men. In reality, though, there are great differences among all of them as well as great similarities. But even more significantly, whatever Obama is and isn’t, this isn’t about his similarities to such people but our similarities to all people. For Obama is certainly one thing: a reflection of us. Remember, the deification of him — though encouraged by the media and perhaps campaign image makers — has been effected, ironically, in a typically American fashion: by groups and individuals largely acting autonomously.

Sense of Self

You see, people tend to believe they’re different from the poor ignorant slobs who mucked things up so badly in ages past, but it’s said we can learn from history precisely because man’s nature doesn’t change. The prospect of living in tyranny is no more real to most Americans than the prospect of mortality is to most teenagers, yet neither group receives a special dispensation from these realities. All people operate by the same principles, and an unchanging one is this: a decline in faith leads to the deification of demagogues.

Now, given that leaders often possess egos surpassing their mortal status, it’s easy enough to understand why they would deify themselves. But why would many deify others instead of themselves? To grasp this, I think we must explore the utilitarian aspect of faith (this isn’t to say that faith is *only* utilitarian; however, that which is true is also often useful).

Among other things, people find a belief in God comforting. It involves the ideas that God, or good, will always triumph in the end; that someone is watching over them, cares for them, will help them, and will be there for them in the end. Now, since this human need doesn’t disappear along with faith, it follows that people will replace God with something else when they lose faith in Him. Thus did millions of Germans cheer Hitler believing he represented security, triumph, economic resurrection, hope, and *change*. And it isn’t surprising that he rose during the desperate days of the Weimar Republic, with its hyper-inflation and hypo-industriousness. It is when people are desperate that they search for a savior; when they are brought to their lowest, they have nowhere to look but up. It is then that they find either the Deity or a demagogue. And when you mistake the latter for the former, the danger is profound. For you don’t disobey a god, you don’t question him; a god is infallible. A prostrate people will follow a messianic leader to the ends of the Earth even if it takes them to the edges of Hell.



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Whatever you consider Obama — faux god, felicitous idol, bad politician, or bold statesman — what is for certain is that as we expand any president’s role, our Constitution’s role contracts. But not only is our president neither divine nor someone who enjoys divine right in a kingdom, we don’t even have a “presidentdom.” We have a constitutional republic. Our whole system is predicated on the idea of having a balance of power and not an excessive amount of it vested in one man, and this is why we cherish oaths to uphold that which prescribes that balance of power: the Constitution. It is also why citizens are not told, “Ask what you can do for your president.” Rather, if people’s focus is to be directed toward anything in government, it should be toward our founding document (which Americans don’t even learn much about today), not a man who is supposed to be subject to it. And the less he is subject to it, the closer we become to being subjects.

Someone who would accept any degree of deification is not only unfit to be worshipped as a god, he is unfit to be followed as a leader. As G.K. Chesterton said in his classic work *The Everlasting Man*, “A great man knows he is not God, and the greater he is the better he knows it.... Nobody can imagine Aristotle claiming to be the father of gods and men, come down from the sky; though we might imagine some insane Roman Emperor like Caligula claiming it for him, or more probably for himself.” It is also correct to say that truly great people know that their leaders aren’t God, and the greater they are, the better they know it.

So, ultimately, the warning here isn’t about Barack Obama. It is about us. Our tendency to make man into God will always be directly proportional to our tendency to make God into myth. And whether or not our current president will be found an acceptable god in our minds or only in his own, or neither, is not the point. The point is not whether we have found our first pharaoh, Akkadian god-king or Caesar. It is that more and more we are becoming the kind of people who need, and will get, precisely that.

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