Presidential Savior Fantasies and the Election of Barack Obama

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Messianic fantasies often develop in small groups and the larger society, as demonstrated by the pioneering work of Wilfred Bion and John J. Hartman. When a group is regressed, its members unconsciously (or consciously) believe their world is falling apart and ready to die, and that they themselves are powerless and incompetent. Imprisoned in these fantasies, group members think that salvation can only come when a powerful parental figure comes to rescue them from the outside.

We are dealing in these instances with the idealized "other." We know from clinical experience as well as historical precedent how idealized images inevitably begin to disintegrate over time. Messy reality eventually seeps in, showing us that the magic we have attributed to the leader does not seem to be working. We do not then realistically evaluate the leader as a flawed human being to whom we have given an impossible task. Instead, we turn against the leader, sometimes with a vengeance. The psychodynamics of these relationships are well known. By creating perfection, we ambivalently come to envy and ultimately hate what we have admired.

One characteristic of the messiah figure is that the savior be a charismatic outsider. There are many examples of this, including Napoleon the Corsican who spoke French with an Italian accent, and Hitler, who spoke German with an Austrian accent. Some psychohistorians have argued these qualities actually constituted part of their collective appeal. The very fact of their outsider status contributed to the collective feeling they were somehow better suited than others to "save" their respective countries, each of which was in crisis. In the organizational and sports worlds messianic fantasies lead to the hiring of outside consultants, new managers, and

coaches in the hope of improving performance. In presidential politics this outsider perception, with some reality, was shared during their campaigns by Carter, Bill Clinton, Perot, and Obama.

Obama's outsider status was defined early on; a *Wall Street Journal* editorial in December 2007 called him "The Man from Nowhere." This was part colloquial usage, of course, as in "he came out of nowhere," but also potentially implied he was a man without a country, that he was from nowhere—literally. The media generally made sure we knew of his outsider status, and that we were meant to see him that way. *The Week* magazine for July 4-11 noted that Jay Newton-Small said on the *Time.com* website that "Obama skyrocketed to the nomination by casting himself as a principled outsider," as just one example.

Early on in the primaries, the media also made sure we recognized Obama's powerful charisma. Journalist Kate Zernike wrote in an article "The Charismatic Mandate," that since he was being "compared to F.D.R." and "most commonly, to John F. Kennedy," Obama's popularity might be easily dismissed as "a cult of personality," suggesting instead that the pejorative phrase "cult of personality" be recast as "charisma" (*New York Times Week in Review*, February 17, 2008). Mentioning that charisma originally meant "a kind of magical power and hero worship," Zernike's article went on to quote historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. that today's usage is largely metaphorical: "a chic synonym for heroic, or for demagogic, or even just 'popular.'" Since at least mid-February 2008 we were being put on notice by the *Times* that we were to treat Obama as the Anointed One.

The thought was everywhere. On *The Daily Show*, comedian John Stuart compared Obama to Moses, though he did find Obama's "halo [to be] tarnished." David Brooks kept the religious outsider theme going in the *Times*, saying that, "Obama has been a sojourner. He opened his book 'Dreams from My Father' with a quotation from Chronicles: 'For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers.'" Obama also says that he "lives apart" (August 5, 2008).

Commenting on Obama's summer trip abroad, especially his speech in Berlin where he hoped to catch a bit of the magic still floating in Berlin's air from Kennedy's famous "*Ich bin ein Berliner*" speech, Brooks wrote in the *Times* of what he called Obama's "messiah complex," which he saw expressed in a "Disneyesque vision in which people inspired by his wonderfulness would link hands across borders and ideologies to magically alleviate hunger, genocide, global warming, and all other forms of human nastiness."

On the conservative side, *National Review Online* called Obama's vision "hazy and unbounded utopianism," the *Washington Post* called him "the golden-tongued orator," while the conservative *Weekly Standard* said "Obama acts like a man duty-bound to come to the rescue of a nation whose citizens are too stupid to look out for themselves." These citations prove that even critical commentary by the political opposition could and did communicate Obama's aura of savior. From a liberal perspective, Hendrick Hertzberg said to the *New Yorker*'s readers, "call him messianic if you like," but also observed that Obama's message of hope had produced in Germany "a sea of delighted Europeans waving American flags instead of burning them." Maureen Dowd said of his trip to Germany: "After 200,000 people thronged to see Obama at the Victory Column in Berlin, christening him 'Redeemer' and 'Savior'…" A *Times* story on August 19, 2008, looking ahead to the Denver convention of the next week spoke of Obama's "expected coronation." Mary Eagan of the *Boston Herald* had noted that, "the media covered Obama's overseas trip as if it were a cross between a coronation and the second coming."

Michael Chabon's coverage of the Democratic Convention in Denver for the *New York Review of Books* continued the theme, saying of Obama's acceptance speech in Denver that, "His resonant pinewood voice lifted, and roughened, and his cadence shifted gradually to testifying" prior to wild "applause" when the audience looked at each other and said "now it was time to go save the world." A colleague told me his students say Obama looks like a

"movie star."

The collective fantasy of Obama as savior was maintained in part by the reluctance of the media to make fun of him. During the primary and presidential campaigns he was called "the joke-proof candidate," largely because of "that which cannot be said"—namely the notion that he is off-limits for comedians because of his race. To make fun of him could certainly devalue him, but more importantly from a psychohistorical point of view, such fun-making would serve to humanize him—certainly not a good thing if we are to retain the fantasy of our savior's charismatic perfection. In comedic reality there is enough there to make fun of. As Joel Stein said in the *Los Angeles Times*, "are we really to believe that the nation's finest comedic minds can think of nothing to say about a 'manorexic' natty dresser with a 37 bowling average whose favorite food is arugula?...there's surely more than enough material to guarantee a level satirical playing field."

Yet a few attempted it. Maureen Dowd noted that *The Daily Show* poked fun at the grandiosity of the "'Obama Quest' and the 'Obamanauts', showing a film clip of 'our hero' in chain mail, fighting off dragons and a Cyclops in his crusade to come home and rule over Dreamerica." Dowd also reported on a caricature drawn on the We Are the World logo in the press section of the aircraft Obama used for his European trip which showed the candidate's ears sticking out and demanding: "Worship me."

Still most media sources continued with the messianic myth-making. All the adulation reported in the media produced a sense of uneasiness on the left as Republican strategists presented Obama as a different kind of "other." His part-African background, which added to his allure as a charismatic outsider for some, for others became a bone of contention. Since January 2008, a friend worriedly told me several times, "I'm not sure I can vote for him. There's a conflict of interest. He's got family in Africa."

As early as November 3, 2006, the cover of *The Week* magazine matched an image of Obama-with-halo with the words,

"IS he THE ONE?" Later, he was introduced by Oprah Winfrey on her show with the words, "He's the one." Americans can be forgiven for wondering if some people, perhaps many, heard Oprah's words with a large case "O." If they did, the large case "O" for many undoubtedly connected on some level with Jesus's violent death and martyrdom.

Given the twists of American history and what many of us have lived through in our lifetimes, such concerns are realistic. Scholars of messianic fantasy are aware that saviors may become a potential sacrifice, with doubters and current believers that Obama is the "Chosen One" joining in the process. While leaving my Western Civilization Honors class in early October 2008, one month before the election, I overheard one of my students tell another, "If he's elected president, I give him six months before he's assassinated."

Such public concerns are always the case when dealing with young, attractive, energetic politicians, especially those who remind us of the Kennedy family. With Obama, who thinks of himself as being like a Kennedy, there is also the added concern about him as a potential target of racial hatred. Assassination fears were on everyone's minds during the various commemorations of Martin Luther King's murder when we were reminded that exactly 40 years ago the hope of millions was traumatically snuffed out that April day in Memphis in 1968.

Former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee, "Speaking at the annual convention of the National Rifle Association…was interrupted by a loud noise from backstage. 'That was Barack Obama,' he said. 'He just tripped off a chair. He's getting ready to speak and somebody aimed a gun at him and he—he dove for the floor'." (*New York Times*, May 17, 2008, p. A12.) One needn't know anything about Freud to understand the deeper feelings being expressed by Americans laughing about it.

That same small *Times* article reminded us that Obama had been "assigned Secret Service coverage last May, the earliest point

in a campaign that a candidate has been given protection. His wife, Michelle, has voiced concerns about his safety" (*New York Times*, May 17, 2008, p. A12). The associations with slain past presidents continued in the run-up to the Inauguration and during the Inauguration itself, through the media connection of Obama to Lincoln and the Lincoln-Kennedy parallels. So desperate was the need to preserve the connection to JFK that during the Inauguration television analysts said over and over again, "It'll be nice to have young children back in the White House for the first time since the Kennedys," completely forgetting Jimmy Carter's daughter Amy, age nine when her father assumed the presidency.

Although to the general public, as opposed to the Washington insiders, he has not been immune to some tarnishing of the halo effect, Obama's charisma continued after his election and inauguration. Knowing comparatively little about him gave us an opportunity to project salvation fantasies more readily onto him. Obama's continuing messianic savior image was symbolized best by Time magazine's 2008 "Person of the Year" cover, where his face joins the faces of the many presidents-elect, appearing there before all, portrayed in the same way, with firm, visionary faces staring off into the future in three-quarter frontal view as seen from below, as if the audience is composed of children looking up at an adored father figure. Yet for me the most telling image of Obama-as-savior comes from the astonishing photo on the front page of the January 19, 2009 New York Times, the day before the inauguration. The president-elect, his back to us, arms extended, holds a small child, its face filled with ecstatic joy basking in Obama's gaze.

Between the election and the inauguration—except for CNN's David Gergen—there were hardly any media voices cautioning that America was expecting too much. In the few days since January 20, the tarnishing of Obama's messianic image has already begun. CNN took Obama to task on the night of January 26, stridently demanding clear and full accountability, public transparency, and rigorous oversight in the new stimulus package, never

mentioning how Bush rammed through a Wall Street bail-out plan without safeguards just a couple of months before. As we know from historical precedents and clinical practice, and we are now beginning to see signs of in the case of Obama, the idealized "other" disintegrates in the face of reality. The magic projected onto the president fades away and the idea spreads that our leader is a flawed and limited human being facing a Sisyphean task. At this point society inclines to repudiate the leader, often with a vengeance. The occupant of the Oval Office is often then knocked off the pedestal that was always a defense against envy and hatred. In the case of the 44th president of the United States we will see how these psychological and political forces play out.

***David Beisel**'s biography can be found on page 258.*

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What Caused and Happens after the Economic Collapse

Tom Ferraro - Psychoanalyst in Private Practice

In the March 2007 issue of Clio's Psyche, the Chinese financial analyst Lily Xu and I published a piece entitled "Comparisons and Reflections on the Psychology of Savings." It was published as part of a symposium where leading economic historians and an educator were invited to comment on our work. We suggested that Americans were unable and unwilling to save because of an insatiable sense of greed for all things consumable. America was an overweight (33 percent of adults are obese), overspent, and overworked society, which was in serious debt as a result. We used Robert Shiller's article entitled "Thrifty China, Spendthrift America" to explore why it was that the Chinese were able to save so much more then Americans. Our article was roundly dismissed by commentators Collins, Felix, and Reynolds,