

Satan in *The Bible*

By [Scott Poole](#)

March 27, 2013

Americans have always believed that the devil likes to play politics. Colonial leader Henry Hugh Brackenridge claimed in 1778 that Satan inspired George III's allegedly ruthless policy toward the colonies. Two decades later, Federalists claimed that the nascent Democratic Party had put forward the antichrist as a presidential candidate in the form of Thomas Jefferson. Later Jedidiah Morse, inventor of Morse code and end-times enthusiast, explained to audiences the Devil's role in Jeffersonianism. He even claimed to have a list of Democrats who belonged to the Illuminati (though like Joe McCarthy, Morse never showed anyone his proof).

The History Channel miniseries *The Bible* has been alleged to continue this trend. Social media became frenzied after the third episode featured a Moroccan actor who viewers insisted looks like President Obama.

The Satan of *The Bible* doesn't strike me as even a near cousin of the president's. Moreover the whole controversy seems like an odd distraction for the left at a moment when a few conservative governors actively resist Medicaid expansion and continue their campaign against worker rights on every front. Or at a time when the Obama administration continues to refuse calls for transparency with regard to its unmanned drone attacks, apparently unaware that it is for such acts of imperial hubris that presidents are remembered.

But it's not just the left that's convinced there's a resemblance—the right may have juiced the story first. Glenn Beck tweeted jokingly that he was watching *The Bible* and “The Devil” looked like “That Guy.” At least one Christian radio host helpfully noted that perhaps God had inspired the makers of the miniseries to warn its viewers of Obama's satanic designs.

The need to see the Obama in the devil, or perhaps the devil in Obama, has a number of recent historical precedents. In the 20th century, figures ranging from Mussolini to Hitler to John F. Kennedy became the focus of speculation for their possible diabolical connections. (“Did you know,” some Christian fundamentalists

whispered to one another in 1960, “that JFK cast 666 votes in the Senate?”)

In the 1970s, the mainstream popularity of Hal Lindsey’s writing and the runaway success of *The Omen* (1976) accounted for an increased interest in demonology. Lindsey’s *Late Great Planet Earth* made evangelical eschatology mainstream. Suddenly the crisis in the Mideast or the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan represented ticks of the apocalyptic time clock.

Over the next 30 years, American Christians declared a number of political leaders to be the spawn of the devil: Jimmy Carter because of his efforts for Mideast peace, Gorbachev because surely that odd birthmark hid the mark of the beast, Saddam Hussein because he was rumored to be rebuilding the ancient city of Babylon. A few marginal fundamentalists even decided that Ronald Wilson Reagan must wear the Prince of Darkness’s mantle—because he wasn’t conservative enough for them, and because his first, middle and last names had six letters each.

The Bible may not have intended to give viewers a devil that looks like Obama. But as with much of the history of Satan in America, the series offers a devil that embodies what many hate and fear—and that some see reflected in Obama’s dark face. It’s highly unlikely that the creators of *The Bible* intended to offend a significant portion of their audience. Much more interesting is their unthinking decision to code their devil with racial categories: swarthy, full lipped and heavy browed.

The Bible’s Satan could have been a serpentine creature or a *Lost*-inspired smoke monster. Instead, the producers gave their audience a dark devil, not so different from how Europeans have been constructing their Satan since their first encounter with Africa. Four hundred years into the new world experiment, neoconservative notions of a “clash of civilizations” blended with evangelical Christianity’s need for a demonic other—demonstrated when, for example, a Marine colonel responsible for the 2004 assault on Fallujah described his mission as a war on “a guy called Satan.”

The white Jesus confronting the swarthy other on the desert sands of the Middle East more or less conforms to what many Christian conservatives believe about the war on terror. But they are not alone in their mania. In fact, at every moment in American history, demonological obsessions have taken the place of social analysis and deep cultural self-criticism.

Perhaps Americans should stop seeing devils everywhere and instead become more sensitive to the social and political evils embedded in the structures of their society.

Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's edited by [Edward J. Blum](#).