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Adolf Hitler – America’s First Black President and Other Oval Office Demons:
The Right-Wing Rhetorical Assault On Barack Obama’s Health Care Plan

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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DEDICATION

It has been said that none of us walks alone and that is certainly true in trying to assemble a project such as this. And I could have never made it past the first step toward completing this often times challenging and difficult goal without the unwavering support of my wife Angela, who has been a constant source of advice, help and inspiration in so many ways.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis endeavors to examine the imagery and rhetoric surrounding the portrayal of President Barack Obama during the national debate over health care reform from the summer of 2009 into the spring of 2010. It is argued that the critics of the health care reform legislation used images to portray the president as Adolf Hitler, Che Guevara, The Joker, as well as other images such as the swastika and the Wehrmacht symbol as stand-in euphemisms for race to discredit Barack Obama.

A number of exemplar images have been selected from various websites and publications specifically addressing the portrayal of Barack Obama not only in starkly menacing tones, but also in images suggesting the president is a villainous black man attempting to pass for white in order to accomplish his tyrannical goals.

The images used in this thesis speak to the power of fantasy themes and the use of fear in rhetorical imagery inasmuch as they attempt to stoke a narrative seizing upon the anxieties of an American public caught in the grip of difficult financial times, finding themselves being led by the nation's first African-American president.

This thesis complements earlier research exploring the role of race in politics and public policy debates. And it is hoped this work will contribute to a better understanding of the growing influence of talk radio, as well as perhaps the need for greater civics literacy.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Barack Obama campaigned throughout 2008 in his quest for the presidency as an agent of change. A significant aspect of that call for change was a substantial overhaul of the nation's health care system, which has left some 40 million Americans either under-insured when it comes to health care needs or without any health insurance coverage at all.

As spring approached in 2009 and well into 2010, the administration began to ramp up its health care initiative, which included such elements as providing universal health care for every American, a single-payer system offering government-funded health care, and increased taxes on private health insurers. As debate increased over various elements of health care reform, opponents of the plan, which included such right-wing radio talk show hosts as Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, as well as the burgeoning Tea Party movement and others, began an effort to cast Obama and his administration as agents of tyranny and villainy through the use of numerous images and rhetorical flourishes – often linking the Obama Administration to Hitler's Third Reich, for example.

While accounts vary, it is estimated somewhere between 50 million and 70 million people – combatants and civilians (including some six million Jews in the Nazi concentration camps) perished in World War II as a result of the rise of Third Reich and

its Axis allies (wwIIarchives.net., United States Holocaust Museum). These figures suggest perhaps that efforts to compare Obama to Hitler and his associates are not only egregious, but historically inaccurate.

Nevertheless, the veracity, or lack thereof, of the Obama-as-Hitler comparison notwithstanding, polling data in support of the administration's health care efforts would suggest the opposition attacks gained some traction over the summer of 2009 and into 2010 as the health care debate raged.

According to an ABC News/Washington Post Poll (2009) in April, 2009, before opponents began their attacks on the health care legislation, 57 percent of Americans approved of Obama's handling of health care, while 29 percent disapproved. By August, the same poll (2009), showed a steady decrease in support, with only 46 percent of respondents supporting the health care initiative, while 50 percent disapproved.

This thesis hypothesizes that the systematic, seemingly relentless cacophony of verbal and symbolic attacks on Obama – from questioning his citizenship, to suggestions health care reform: was a giant step toward tyrannical socialism - served to undermine public support for the plan by playing upon euphemistic themes of race-baiting.

These themes include efforts to characterize and caricaturize Barack Obama as an agent of tyranny symbolized by Adolf Hitler, Che Guevara, and The Joker.

This qualitative study will elaborate and expand upon those themes in an effort to determine if an argument can be made that the on-going health care debate leading up to and extending beyond the passage of the measure by the United States Congress and subsequent signing into law by President Obama could be construed as a de facto debate about on-going race and racial attitudes in America.

While it is difficult to link precisely the decline in support for Obama's health care effort with the growing chorus of rhetoric on the political right, most notably the neo-conservative talk radio community, the parallels between the public discourse and the declining public support for health care reform would suggest a possible linkage .

It also might be argued that while the loud and vociferous voices of the political right-wing talk radio establishment do wield influence in their ability to galvanize public opinion, the bully pulpit of the presidency is not without its own unique power.

Indeed, following a September 2009 speech by Obama defending his health care plan a CBS News Poll (2009) showed a demonstrable increase in support for the health care reform effort from the previous week after the president's speech in which 52 percent of those polled opposed the plan, while 38 percent approved. Another poll conducted by Zogby International (2009) reflected similar results.

The stage was set for public antipathy toward health care as evidenced by a poll conducted by NBC News and the Wall Street Journal (Wallstein,2009), which indicated 61 percent of respondents believed America was in a state of decline, with 35 percent disagreeing and another 4 percent unsure. Edge (2010) suggests the seeds of racism Obama would face as he began his presidency were present, but often ignored in the seeming euphoria over the 2008 election results, something he labels the Southern Strategy 2.0.

This study will briefly describe rhetorical/visual discourse analysis as the research method for this thesis before exploring the meanings of the possible race-based images used by the right-wing opponents of the current health care effort to demonize –

indeed “monsterize Barack Obama, who emerges from this discourse directed from the political right as the ultimate “Other.”

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

To long-time observers of public policy debates, the current controversy over health care reform may well seem like a case of same song, different dance.

Over the summer and into the fall of 2009, critics of President Obama's health care initiative attempted to cast the reform legislation by characterizing the administration as an extension of socialism – an effort on the part of the federal government to control Americans' lives.

But the opposition and especially the rhetorical and semiotic fervor on the part of the political right, most notably the neo-conservative radio talk show community, recalls a similar effort aimed at the last significant attempt to overhaul the nation's health care system by then First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton in 1993-94. For a variety of reasons that effort failed in the wake of a heated rhetorical campaign to discredit Clinton's stewardship of the reform proposal through the legislative process.

While there are some notable voices on the left of the political spectrum – MSNBC's Keith Olbermann and Rachel Maddow, for example, it is the neo-conservative right-wing of the political landscape who have historically dominated the discourse and the agenda over the television and radio airwaves.

Indeed Edge (2010) argues the appearance of the election of a black candidate to the highest office in the land allowed opponents to make the case the nation had entered a

post-racial era free of racism, and therefore the time had come to eliminate racial equality remedies such as affirmative action, which only served to foment discord, demagoguery and racism against white Americans.

Edge advances the theory that Obama's election served two purposes: A) it represented an example of the nation's progress in race relations; while B) at the same time it provided a convenient bogeyman to threaten white audiences with accusations the new president was attempting to deprive white Americans of their freedom and liberty.

In his analysis of voting patterns, Edge notes Obama fared about as well among white voters in 2008 as Al Gore did in 2000 and John Kerry in 2004. Where Obama fared considerably better was among black voters (95 percent), Latinos (67 percent) and Asian Americans (62 percent), Edge posits, adding that 90 percent of John McCain's electoral base came exclusively from white voters, suggesting a racial component was alive and well in the presidential campaign of 2008.

As the Obama Administration began its push for health reform in 2009, the cacophony of opposition could be viewed as an echo of the last attempt to reshape health care policy during the Clinton Administration.

As Anderson (2002) notes:

The sinking of health-care reform appeared to drown the woman at the helm and Rodham Clinton was publicly chastised for being pushy, meddlesome and for telling Congress what to do. The First Lady's reputation for 'taking over' earned her the moniker 'bitch' – uttered bluntly by the mother of House Speaker Newt Gingrich (p.1).

Anderson argues the term “bitch” was much more than merely a politically incorrect and distasteful term used to describe the First Lady of the United States, but rather served to cast the health care debate through the rhetorical frame in the eyes of the public that a massive economic restructuring of the country was being guided by an unpleasant, duplicitous, distrustful woman.

Perloff (1998) suggests the framing of the health care debate was an object lesson in political communication as a battle waged between supporters and opponents – one side framing the issue as a ploy by the government to create “Clinton Care” or “Ration Care.” Meanwhile, the administration framed its argument in more egalitarian terms simply to provide all “Americans” with the health care they deserved and reduce costs.

In the midst of the health care debate in 1993-94, Perloff notes, despite the more altruistic arguments on the part of the Clinton Administration and the First Lady that the plan would benefit all Americans, especially those without health care, the counter argument this was another massive, intrusive, and costly big government program carried more weight with a public weary of ever-growing bureaucracies.

And the most potent rhetorical and symbolic representation of the downside of reforming the health care system in America ultimately became, Anderson (2002) argues, Hillary Clinton as “bitch.” The “bitch” label, Anderson asserts, played to the archetype of female identity in America, for it spoke directly to the imagery of an overly assertive, meddlesome, uppity woman who refused to stay in her subservient place. It might be argued, as this thesis will attempt to explore, that in 2009 the anti-health care reform rhetoric was targeted toward an overly assertive, uppity, meddlesome black man who refused to remain in his place.

As well, Hillary Rodham Clinton's emergence as a key administration player in the health care effort also came at a time of heightened media growth and the advent of the 24-hour-cable television news cycle. And thus, as Corrigan (2000) notes, the attacks on the First Lady found a multitude of outlets ready to offer exposure.

In short, the bully pulpit once enjoyed – and even dominated – by a president who can command virtually instant access to the media is now forced to be shared by a multitude of cable news outlets such as CNN, MSNBC, FOX and others to give voice and exposure to opposing viewpoints. Or as Corrigan (2000) writes: “As these groups have grown in sophistication and effectiveness, the ability of a president to keep the public's attention focused on a particular issue has become more problematic” (p.153).

Cast against the rhetorical and symbolic frames of the 2009-2010 health care debate in which the Obama Administration has been painted as a version of socialism 2.0 to sway public opinion against the legislation, this thesis seeks to determine whether the lessons the Clinton Administration confronted 16 years ago in attempting the same level of reform are being revisited, shifting from a sexist bias to a racial bias.

In both cases, it could be suggested opponents of health care reform created a “monster” in order to stir fear and doubt over health care reform. In one case, the villain was Hillary Rodham Clinton as “bitch.” In the wake of the more recent health care debate, this thesis will explore whether Barack Obama has been cast within the rhetorical imagery frame of race by conservative radio talk show hosts, selected websites and selected newspaper articles..

As Burke (1969) argues: “Taken simply at its face value, imagery invites us to respond in accordance with nature (p.17). Rhetorical imagery, Burke suggests, is rooted

in the very function of language itself and constantly re-invented, and as such the symbolic nature of language becomes a means by which people form a cooperative bond between one another as they respond to the imagery suggested by the language and/or the symbol employed to convey the intended message.

Burke advances the idea that through language believed to be understood by the receivers, the crafter of the imagery is able to identify the views, and biases, of those they wish to communicate with.

Meddaugh (2009) argues today's race-baiting environment, like so many other forms of mass communications, has grown more sophisticated and politically savvy in conveying its bigoted messages, noting these groups have deftly exploited the Internet to lure – knowingly or not – growing cadres of new followers.

Since many users of the Internet are younger consumers of cyberspace, Meddaugh advances the notion they lack the requisite critical thinking skills to adequately evaluate the information they are exposed to, adding the mere presence of information accessed via the Internet is imbued with a legitimacy that may not be fully warranted.

Thus, cyber-information, often published anonymously on the Internet can, in effect, create its own reality. In her analysis of the white supremacist website Stormfront, which praises Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke, Meddaugh notes the racist/hate language has been toned down in its virulence in order to attract less discerning followers, something she terms “reasonable racism.”

Meddaugh suggests the white supremacist movement – at least in the eyes of those who feel betrayed by government - is angry over immigration, or the bank bail-outs, or the perceived illegitimate presence of an African-American in the White House

and serves as a medicine man of sorts providing a haven and a patina of legitimacy for its conspiracy theories and fears.

Adding legitimacy to the white supremacist hate culture is the notion that urbane, educated African-Americans such as Obama, rather than serving as a positive example of racial progress, is instead advanced as prima facie evidence of an alien influence upon white society since it betrays the conventional wisdom within these groups of the African-American as an illiterate, shiftless, untrustworthy and threatening figure..

And thus, Meddaugh argues the racist emerges as a freedom fighter in opposition to the tyrannical order – advocating the need to “take our country back.” For Meddaugh the Stormfront white supremacists offer comfort and hope particularly within those groups who lack critical thinking skills, and for whom the soothing rhetoric of the Stormfront resonates across multiple audiences, and communications platforms.

Conant (2009) too, has taken note of the softening of racist language and symbols by such groups the Klan and Stormfront, pointing to the Stormfront’s advocacy of such things as green energy and women’s rights while also advocating for the “voluntary resettlement” for minorities. Indeed, Conant notes Stormfront, in effort to appear more mainstream and attract a wider level of acceptance, removed images of swastikas from its website, as well as any references to the Third Reich.

As van Dijk notes (1999), ethnic and racial prejudices are acquired and shared among the dominant social group as part of everyday discourse in such as way as to conceal or deny de facto negative racial attitudes.

Just as in sports discourse, language serves as a stand-in for race. As Matheson (2005) notes, the expression of racism through language, the essence of racist rhetoric

imbues the speaker with the power to define the object of the speech into any preferred identity.

For van Dijk even blatantly racist discourse in society, especially among political, media, academic, and corporate elites routinely is accompanied by denials and efforts to mitigate the appearance of racist speech. “This suggests that language users who say negative things about minorities are well aware of the fact that they may be understood as breaking the social norm of tolerance or acceptance,” writes van Dijk (1999, p. 542).

Edge (2010) argues in the “post-racial” period following Obama’s election, conservatives cannot discuss racial issues per se, but rather have engaged in a rhetorical code of white middle class victimization and coded race-based language of patriotism and American identity, citing references to Obama in tyrannical terms.

In essence Edge advances the notion that: “Racism 2.0” allows whites to accept individual blacks who are seen as “different” from the rest of their race, without challenging their racist assumptions about the Black community at large.” Indeed there is some compelling evidence supporting Edge’s views.

In a recent study, Knowles, Lowery and Schaumberg (2010) conclude there was a verifiable aura of racism hanging over the health care debate, noting that using the exact same elements, respondents reacted favorably to health care reform when they believed it was the proposal first set forth by the Clinton Administration in the early 1990s, but reacted unfavorably toward the same proposal when informed it was the Obama health care plan.

Both plans advocated ending discrimination based on pre-existing conditions, capping out-of-pocket medical expenses and the like.

The authors argue Obama's race and not simply his political views or ideological character undermined support for his health care initiative. In fact, Knowles, Lowery and Schaumberg note highly prejudiced individuals who expressed race-neutral objections to the plan, including the suggestion the health plan was a step toward socialism, used that objection to obfuscate their racial attitudes toward Obama.

.It could be argued the debate over health care, against the backdrop of the nation's first black president, mixed together with the worst economic crisis in the nation since The Great Depression, all formed to create a perfect storm of anger, distrust and racism across the body politic.

As the Southern Poverty Law Center's Potok (2010) notes, the formation of hate groups across the country surged by 80 percent in 2009 alone, with 136 new designated anti-immigrant vigilante groups established.

The trend has been on the upswing since 2000, Potok notes, with hate groups rising by some 54 percent between 2000 and 2008. And Potok cites the creation of approximately 363 new Patriot militia movements – a 244 percent increase in 2009 alone.

Potok attributes this rise in vigilante/militia/Patriot/hate groups to racial changes in the population, a growing debt burden, and a sense the banking and automotive bailouts did little more than benefit the "elites" in society at the expense of the middle class foisted upon them not only by a leader characterized by his critics as a socialist and/or fascist, but also by one who is also an African-American president.

The presence of a black leader in the White House has only deepened the resentment among these groups in light of non-white immigration and a demographic

decline of whites in America, which has served to “racialize” the so-called “Patriot” movement (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2009).

It is possible that the racial predicate that awaited Obama during the health care debate in 2009-2010, could be found during the 2008 presidential campaign. As Sparks (2009) notes both the primary campaign for the Democratic nomination and the subsequent presidential campaign against Republican Arizona Sen. John McCain and his running mate, Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin frequently employed coded racial messages in their rhetoric.

As Sparks argues, at one point the McCain campaign referred to Obama as “The One,” in an attempt to subtly position Obama as an uppity black man who had forgotten his place. Sparks posits such racially coded language was an attempt to recast the rhetoric into publicly acceptable political discourse

Sparks cites efforts by Palin to denigrate Obama’s prior work as a “community organizer,” which was an effort to associate the term with other racially emotional language such as “affirmative action,” which suggests in the minds of many middle-class white voters as providing an unfair advantage to benefit a minority or “The Other.”

By adopting this frame, Sparks argues Palin was mocking community organizing, social justice, equality, or marginalized people of “The Other”

Attempting to link Obama to William Ayers, who had been active in the Weather Underground in the 1960s, Sparks posits, allowed the McCain campaign to accuse Obama of links to terrorism and thus created an association between a black man and many white fears of the violent black urban monster.

There is a long-term political consequence to pay for all this heated rhetoric, notes Hemmer (2010), in that the extreme language conjuring images of end-times simply on the basis on a vote to reform health care, only deepens the political divide in the United States, as well as having a chilling effect on any hopes for a subsequent sober, rational social/political discourse on public policy issues.

This, it could be argued, has given rise to a steady drumbeat of anti-Obama rhetoric, attempting to portray the president as a despotic tyrant.

Mythology, or a fantasy theme, in the propagandist's hands is a valuable tool to promote a personal agenda. Critical to this effort, Combs (1984) suggests, is the effective use of popular art forms, in order to advance the propagandist's message by appealing to fundamental human beliefs – and fears.

Applied to the health care debate, as Combs notes: “Political groups are drawn into the logic of propaganda as evidence as to how they are protecting the American Dream” (p. 110). To that end, Combs argues, the mass media play a pivotal role in assisting in the creation of symbolic realities, which appeal – or perhaps not – to the collective imaginations of the public.

Combs makes the critical point that consumers of mass media are what he terms “active learners” who treat their news diet as a sort of buffet line – picking which outlets of information they chose to consume and/or reinforce their belief system and rejecting others which do not conform with what their belief system values.

At the time Combs advanced this theory in 1984, the media buffet line was far thinner than it is today. Media consumers had access to limited channel offerings on

broadcast television and the cable television industry was, at best, in its adolescence. The Internet was still years away and talk radio as we know it today was in its infancy.

Combs's views on media selection by consumers has even greater salience today.

Indeed, it might be argued the media landscape could be viewed as segregated to the extent consumers can find a safe haven for their biases across the radio, television, and cable dials and a plethora of Internet sites catering to their views without fear of ever stumbling across an alternative opinion or fact challenging their viewpoints.

As Kuhn (2010) notes, while Obama attracted white male voters in the 2008 election, that support has begun to melt away in the wake of a stubborn recession and the perception the health care legislation is a socialist ploy.

Kuhn suggests the white male flight away from Obama has deep populist roots, as the average working man has watched bail-outs for the rich and for corporations, and a health care plan perceived as a bail-out for the poor, with nothing left for those left behind in the middle class.

And Gallup (2010) supports Kuhn. A March, 2010 poll found 56 percent of respondents believe the health care plan would benefit lower income families, while only 34 percent of respondents believed it would provide any relief to middle income wage earners.

It could be argued this growing middle class frustration has given rise to such movements as the Tea Party activists who provide a forum for those who abhor big government to coalesce around a common goal.

Contract From America, a play on former U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich's Contract For America, is the Tea Party movement's manifesto for the nation's future

(2010). The contract calls for individual liberty, limited government, economic freedom, market-based health care and insurance reform, tax reform, transparency, protecting the Constitution, ending excessive government spending, and protecting the press by way of prohibiting the re-establishment of the Fairness Doctrine, as well as and any effort on the part of the Federal Communications Commission to require “localism” or “diversity” quotas.

Jonsson (2010) argues the Tea Party movement has become a mainstream political force, suggesting the Contract From America represents a maturation process from simple sign-waving malcontents to a reform movement grounded in ideas.

Berger (2009) raises a similar caution when he argues that former fringe groups are now being viewed as mainstream. Proponents of health care were being branded as genocidal fiends in connection with elements of the health care plan – such as “death panels” – which did not exist.

Van Dijk (1995) argues institutional and intrapersonal communication play an intrinsic “role in the enactment, expression, legitimization and acquisition of racism in society.”

Hate speech in all its forms – verbal, visual, symbolic – exerts a formidable cognitive influence on groups, molding opinions, re-enforcing stereotypes and supporting ideological perceptions.

For van Dijk the role of “elites” holds special power in formulating and extending hate speech since they are the ones – be it in government, or social organizations, or political groups – who create, monitor and control those below them with their message.

Critical to this paradigm, van Dijk notes, is having access to media since this is the means by which agenda-setting occurs and thus controls the discourse, the framing of constructs and therefore the inculcation of message and image.

It is axiomatic, van Dijk argues, that political discourse is focused and depends on control of the message for its effectiveness. Arguing against the backdrop of race-based hate speech it is vital for the conveyers of the message to maintain a patina of the notion that the speakers are only engaging in and asking for fairness. It is critical, van Dijk posits, that the elites controlling the message retain a self-image of tolerance.

Historically, race – either overtly or covertly – has played a prominent role in American political discourse, perhaps reaching (until the ascension of Barack Obama) its nadir in the 1988 presidential campaign when opponents of Democratic presidential nominee Michael Dukakis injected race-based fear-mongering into the campaign through the introduction of the Willie Horton ad (Whillock, 1995).

Horton, a convicted felon in Massachusetts where Dukakis was governor, committed a heinous murder while out of prison on a furlough. The event was used by the George H.W. Bush campaign in a series of commercials to portray Dukakis as soft on crime as well as engender fears among white voters since Horton was black (Whillock, 1995).

Whillock argues such visceral race-based appeals consciously inflame emotions of individuals, and denigrate the out-class in order to win at the ballot box.

This form of appeal, Whillock notes, serves to construct barriers between social groups be they economic, race or gender based, urging a distance must be kept between those “Others” and the rest of us. And thus, once the barriers have been raised and the

isolation between groups has taken root, this only further enables isolated groups to justify their behavior and/or their speech.

Most importantly, Whillock notes the appeals to the fears of those opposed to health care, for example, cannot be viewed by the receiver of the message as simply an atypical aberration, but rather a very real, very systemic threat to their lives and security.

And thus, Whillock posits it is important to create a situation where any effort for the out-class to defend itself is dismissed as false and predictable and therefore invalid.

A case could be advanced that the rhetoric deployed by the radio right wing is at the very least providing unwitting support for the growing Patriot/militia/white supremacist movement which has markedly grown since the election and inauguration of Obama.

Determining precise listenership numbers for nationally syndicated talk shows is more an art than a science. Because of disparities between markets and different times of the day many of these hosts are on the air, arriving at an exact, independent number of who is listening to Glenn Beck, or Rush Limbaugh, or Sean Hannity or many others on the right-wing spectrum of the radio dial is problematic.

According to the Pew Project for Excellence In Journalism (2009), in 1990, there were 395 radio stations across the country dedicated to a news/talk format. By 2008, Pew notes the news/talk format had grown to 2,046 stations.

Indeed, Pew reports that with an estimated 48 million listeners, the news/talk format is the second most popular format in radio, lagging only behind country music.

However, as Farhi (2009) reports, it has become a generally accepted industry dictum that Limbaugh, who is carried on some 400 radio stations across the country

reaches an estimated audience of between 15 million and 20 million listeners. And Zaitchik (2010), who has recently penned an unauthorized biography of Beck, estimates the commentator reaches a radio audience of approximately eight million listeners.

By comparison, *The New York Times*, widely regarded as the most influential newspaper and in the minds of some the nation's most liberal icon, has a relatively paltry 950,000 daily circulation (Plambeck, 2010).

By any standard, it can be argued both the individual and combined reach of right-wing talk radio possesses considerable clout to sway and influence public opinion. Indeed, although advertisers withdrew commercials from Beck's daily radio show in the wake of a boycott after the host accused Obama of being a racist, his listenership increased to a one-day record when 2.8 million listeners tuned in (Los Angeles Times, (2009). Talkers Magazine (2010), the industry trade publication for talk radio, claims Hannity has a national radio audience of 14 million people, while Michael Savage reaches about nine million listeners.

Pew (2010) notes all of the top ten news/talk radio hosts are considered to be conservative in their political leanings; Rush Limbaugh (15 million), Sean Hannity (14 million), Glenn Beck (9 million), Michael Savage (9 million), Dr. Laura Schlessinger (9 million), Laura Ingraham (6.25 million), Mark Levin (6.25 million), Dave Ramsay (6.25 million), Neal Bortz (4.75 million) and Mike Gallagher (4.75 million).

By contrast an earlier Pew study (2009, noted the most popular liberal news/talk radio personality, Ed Schultz, saw his audience shrink for the preceding years dropping from 3.25 million listeners in 2007, to an audience of 3 million in 2008. The rest of the

liberal radio hosts, according to Pew: Lionel (Mike LeBron), Stephanie Miller and Alan Colmes who individually reach about 1.5 million listeners.

Pew (2009) also noted that with the exception of Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee and Kentucky, talk radio is either the preferred number one or number two format throughout the nation.

By any reasonable standard, news/talk radio enjoys a substantial reach across the media landscape. As Alterman and Goldberg (2010) note the audience captured by news/talk radio is twice the collective audience reached by the three nightly network newscasts combined and seven times greater than the cable news outlets.

Historically, the radio dial has been a potent vehicle for the political right to advance its agenda.

In its relative infancy in the 1920s, radio provided a home for the political right with the one of the early progenitors of virulent, radical hate speech in the broadcasts of firebrand Father Charles Coughlin, a Roman Catholic priest, who took to the airwaves in 1926 on a Detroit radio station and within two years quickly became the populist voice of a disaffected middleclass (Warren, 1996).

A prominent force in American political life from 1926 until 1942, the charismatic Coughlin mixed a passionate, messianic fervor with a keen understanding of the potential power and reach of the microphone to rail against what he claimed were dark conspiracies within the United States government to do the bidding of Marxists who controlled the nation's banking and industrial sectors (Warren, 1996).

Through coded language such as “atheistic Marxists,” as a stand-in euphemism for Jews, Coughlin fueled public fears and anxieties as the Great Depression enveloped the country.

Indeed at one point he referred to President Franklin Roosevelt as the “anti-God”.

In a 1938 radio broadcast following the Kristallnacht attacks on Jewish homes and businesses in Germany and Austria, Coughlin took to the airwaves to defend the act of anti-Semitism, noting: “It is the belief, be it well, or ill-unfounded of the present German government, not mine, that Jews are not as religionists but as nationals only, were responsible for the economic and social ills suffered by the Fatherland since the signing of the Versailles Treaty” (p.156).

By 1942, as Coughlin’s anti-Semitic rhetoric became even more rabid – he even accused Jews of trying to undermine Easter and Christmas – and as World War II erupted, Coughlin’s time as a political force waned (Warren). Nevertheless, Coughlin enjoyed a nearly 20 year run as one of the nation’s most influential media figures (Warren, 1996).

Still, it could be argued Coughlin would set the stage for future right-wing radio hosts, from Walter Winchell in the 1940s and 1950s, to Joe Pyne and Les Crane in the 1960s and 1970s, to Rush Limbaugh who began his rise to prominence in the 1980s, to be eventually joined on the dial by Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, Michael Savage, and others.

It is an interesting question as to whether Limbaugh, Beck, Hannity, Savage, and the rest of right-wing talk radio hosts would hold the influential sway over their audiences they presently enjoy if the medium was still obligated to adhere to the Fairness Doctrine.

From 1949 until 1987 broadcasters were bound by the Federal Communications Commission rule called the Fairness Doctrine, which required those who held a federal broadcasting license to provide equal time to on-air commentaries (Harvey, 1998).

At issue was a determination by the FCC to create impartiality in broadcasting – not to stifle, or prevent the expression of public opinion, but to ensure opposing views and voices would also have the opportunity to be heard as well in the public interest.

Until 1987 perhaps the prevailing precedent undergirding the Fairness Doctrine was the 1969 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Red Lion Broadcasting v. Federal Communications Commission* (395 U.S. 367, 1969, Weaver, Lively, 2006, Barron,, Diennes, 1993). The court held the goals of the First Amendment are best preserved in broadcasting when free speech rights are transferred from broadcasters to the public. In the *Red Lion* case, the court noted the rights of free speech on the part of broadcasting should not trump the free speech rights of individuals.

However by 1987, during an era of deregulation fostered by the Reagan Administration, the tide began to turn when the FCC suspended the Fairness Doctrine, arguing broadcasting entities should also enjoy free speech.

As Harvey notes, the logic behind the suspension of the Fairness Doctrine was grounded in the argument that the doctrine's equal time provisions exerted undue burdens on broadcasters while also creating a chilling effect on broadcasters who would shy away from reporting on controversial issues for fear of having to honor the complexities of allowing alternative points of view to be expressed.

While former FCC Chairman Newton Minnow excoriated the demise of the Fairness Doctrine as a corporate rejection of a public service obligation (Jones, 2006), it

is hardly a coincidence the demise of the doctrine coincided perfectly with the rise of Limbaugh – and in time the voices who would follow him – as a significant and powerful voice of the right on the radio dial.

As the obligation to provide alternative points of view on the dial disappeared, the next generation of broadcasting following in Limbaugh’s footsteps was free to use the microphone without fear of accountability, accuracy or – fairness - in order to promulgate a political point of view.

To be sure in 2010, given the unfiltered rise of the Internet where anyone can post any opinion regardless of accuracy, or truth, or fear of consequence, the notion of a Fairness Doctrine may seem antiquated or even quaint.

So it is an interesting question what the tone of today’s Internet discourse might be if the concept of fairness existent within so-called mainstream media. Would Internet bloggers still be quick to engage in cyber demagoguery today if the likes of Limbaugh, Beck, Hannity, and Savage were themselves obliged to a standard to provide a fair and balanced – albeit opinionated – protocol of offering alternative points of view?

Duffy (2003) sees the interactivity, anonymity, and the perception of credibility as the Internet’s most powerful tools, making the Internet the prime weapon of choice for all manner of hate groups across the ideological spectrum. And because these groups are able to couch their messages of hate and prejudice within the context of mainstream values, their ability to gain credibility and recruit followers by exploiting fears make them a political force to contend with, Duffy argues.

This view is aligned with the work of Bormann (1985) who developed the concept of Fantasy Theme Analysis, which argues individuals create an imaginative

interpretation of events to fulfill a psychological and/or rhetorical need. Bormann further suggests that dramatizing messages that create a fantasy chain of beliefs constitutes a Fantasy Theme.

For a Fantasy Theme to exist, Bormann (1985) posits that there must be evidence a “symbolic convergence” has occurred linking various groups in a shared fantasy belief system. And this process, Bormann argues, infuse the emotional and memory banks with meanings and emotions commonly agreed upon by the group as a result of the symbolic cue.

These cues, Bormann argues can come from coded words or phrases such as “Reaganomics,” or “Pearl Harbor,” or “Munich,” or the “Alamo,” each one of these creating a coded, shared cue of economic reform, or war, or terrorism. Thus, the use of the cue phenomenon allows for the development of a fantasy type for the group, noting a phrase such as “Another Vietnam” immediately cues a code for an unwinnable war. Indeed, Bormann suggests, “Interpreting events in terms of human action allows us to assign responsibility, to praise or blame, to arouse or propitiate guilt, to hate and to love” (p.9).

Central to the effectiveness of any Fantasy Theme construct is the need for drama, Bormann notes. Therefore it is critical within a Fantasy theme for there to be heroes and villains, positive and negative consequences in the quest to craft a shared consciousness.

He argues that through the prism of Fantasy Themes a reform rhetoric emerges portraying a society in crisis, while offering hope for a better world. And therefore, the major objective of reform rhetoric within a Fantasy Theme vision is to indoctrinate converts to the fantasy message to create a cohesive, committed group of followers.

Bormann (1981) notes that group fantasizing correlates to individual fantasizing and extrapolates then to a speaker-audience fantasy construct, which lends itself to the creation of dramatic storylines by mass media.

Together, Bormann reasons, the content of the fantasy can consist of characters real or fictitious, who play out their roles in a setting of time and place often removed from the here and now focused on conflict or a problem related to the tasks taken on by the fantasy group.

And thus these fantasy chains serve to create a common culture, demanding an emotional commitment from the group and a mandate to proclaim a common commitment to the fealty of the fantasy drama being advanced by the group (Bormann, 1981).

In this sense a new social reality is created, Bormann asserts, populated by heroes and villains, good and evil, emotions and attitudes conspiring together to embrace and promote the fantasy, to form a rhetorical vision.

The fantasy then becomes the reality, Bormann argues, easily allowing those who have bought into the fantasy theme to ignore contradicting evidence to the fantasy from even common sense experience.

More contemporaneously, Duffy (2003) advances Bormann's Fantasy Theme approach by applying by what she terms "Fantasy Theme Analysis" to explain how hate groups are able to exploit the Internet for their own purposes by creating a rhetorical frame or vision as to how things are or will be. By creating – and sharing – these Fantasy Themes within and between hate groups, Duffy argues a shared fantastical identity is created.

Regardless of where these groups, (for example Stormfront on the right, or the Nation of Islam on the left), may position their political ideology, Duffy cites several reoccurring themes advanced by these groups. First, Duffy notes there is a plea for justice and fairness; that they are being victimized at the expense of “The Other;” that a double-standard is being imposed by elites upon the disenfranchised. Next, Duffy argues hate groups advance the idea there is a media conspiracy to hold down and ignore their plight while doing the bidding of the elites, often as part of Zionist conspiracy to control the media. As well, these groups – via their Internet postings – advance the belief that resurrection, a new day, is just around the corner if only the disenfranchised will unite and rise up against the oppression.

The historian Richard Hofstadter (1964) argues style can often trump truth or falsity of a polemical argument. Hofstadter points to a number of historical conspiracy theories to advance or stir public fears at times of public unrest ranging from Vatican plots to rule the world, to fostering fears of Masons against the Jesuits, to the rise of the John Birch Society, which saw the United Nations as an instrument of then Soviet domination.

In a rather prescient analysis of 21st century media rhetoric, Hofstadter (1964) notes the extreme elements of the American right have a paranoid construct rife with conspiracies as to how the middle-class has become dispossessed by its leaders who are in league with the dark forces of tyranny. Hofstadter suggests these extreme elements see in every act of error or incompetence by the nation’s leadership a dark cloud of treason at work doing the bidding of those who would destroy the nation.

In order for the rhetoric of fear to gain traction, Hofstadter argues the conspiracies being advanced must be cast in apocalyptic tones. Societies must be threatened. A way of life must be teetering on the brink. The entire political order must be facing extinction. Basic, common, decent values must be up against the wall.

And it is up to the conspirator, joined by the people, to defend the nation against this assault since, as Hofstadter suggests, this is a conflict between good and absolute evil. There is no room for compromise inasmuch as the enemy is the personification of evil.

What bolsters the conspirator's argument, Hofstadter notes, is what he described as the "quality of pedantry" – the need to underscore their fears with accumulated evidence to support their allegations of doom on the horizon. Hofstadter cites the red-baiting Sen. Joseph McCarthy's 96-page pamphlet, "McCarthyism," which contained no fewer than 313 footnoted references purporting to validate his assertion that communists had taken over the U.S. government.

Since many users of the Internet are younger consumers of cyberspace, Meddaugh (2009) advances the notion they lack the requisite critical thinking skills to adequately evaluate the information they are exposed to, adding the mere presence of information accessed via the Internet is imbued with a legitimacy that may not be fully warranted.

The perception of an existent threat is central to Altheide's (2002) work on the power of fear as a political weapon in manipulating public opinion. In what he terms the "discourse of fear," Altheide reasons that a calculated effort employing symbolic awareness articulating danger and risk is critical to creating an effective environment of threats toward their everyday existence.

Altheide posits: “Fear in a democratic society requires the mass media. If these media are perpetuating claims about the ‘Other’ – the likely targets of future state action – then this fear-generating endeavor becomes an act of mass media terrorism on the ‘public body,’ if not individuals who subsequently suffer from state action” (p. 12).

And thus, as Meddaugh (2009) argues, the racist emerges as a freedom fighter in opposition to the tyrannical order – advocating the need to “take our country back.” For Meddaugh the Stormfront white supremacists offer comfort and hope particularly within those groups who lack critical thinking, for whom the soothing rhetoric of the Stormfront resonates across multiple audiences.

McPhail (1994) argues race and racism must be treated as linguistic manifestations of language constructed within the realities of negative differences. As well McPhail asserts that race, by virtue of its linguistic definitions, undermines the possibilities and potential of human action. Citing the concept of complicity, McPhail suggests racial language provides the consensual affirmation of negation as a strategy for human interaction.

These negative differences brought to the fore by racial linguistics are grounded in a social reality in the way human beings perceive each other, only reaffirming within the dialogue that we are indeed separate and distinct, which in turn allows for the reaffirmation and reinforcement of negative symbols and attitudes, which perpetuate the racial reality.

McPhail advances the concept that racism denies the necessary standards of communication. In order for communication to be effective, theories of persuasion must be grounded in existential unity. He notes that white racism is characterized by denial of

a coherent black epistemological rhetoric, citing in this instance the power of Martin Luther King's oratory skills to advance the cause of civil rights.

The ability of King to rationally and articulately champion civil rights through the power of language not only ran counter to the stereotypical speaking skills imposed by white culture on African-Americans, but also raised the specter that King might actually succeed.

More pointedly, McPhail argues racism goes beyond mere bigotry and ignorance, and reflects an entire systemic belief structure throughout society – grounded in assumptions about ourselves, the world around us and others. He rejects the easy compromise of race-based dialogue to simply agree to disagree, suggesting this is an all too convenient way to avoid the very foundations of the rhetoric of racism since it merely legitimizes judgments based on negative differences. This construct would seem to comport favorably with Barthes's views of image interpretation.

Barthes (1985) argues that all images are polysemous, implying a “floating chain” of signifiers, which allows the receiver to accept or reject. The linguistic messages for Barthes are both denotational and connotational, arguing the conveyance of the knowledge of the sign is heavily dependent on cultural attitudes. More pointedly, Barthes posits if the structure of the sign or image is delivered in a simple and coherent fashion, this opens the way for the explanation of the role of the image within society to be justified. He notes that within mass communications the linguistic message is present in every image, be it a title caption, film dialogue, a comic strip or a message portrayed on a balloon.

It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words and indeed, as Barthes argues, simply the presence of a linguistic message regardless of its length matters since the

signified is cast in relation to the image – a concept he defines as “anchorage” and “relay.” And since all images are polysemous, according to Barthes it follows that in every society techniques evolve to fix this floating chain of signifiers in such a way as to “counter the terror of uncertain signs.” Indeed, the linguistic message constitutes one of these techniques.

Against this backdrop, Altheide (2002) notes that the direction of fear within a society, by extension, asserts control over that society. And when that manipulation of fear becomes part of the fabric in which events are viewed, fear then becomes a part of the rhetorical discourse.

Critical to this discourse is elevating victimhood as a social status, which in turn validates and, makes meaningful the pervasive fear, through the use of symbols, language and icons used to represent complex ideas. Indeed, victimization is critical in the process of creating a successful environment of fear.

Intrinsic to the discourse of fear for Altheide is the need to create images and targets of what or who is to be feared. To that end, he argues fear works best when it is associated with “ideal” representations of villainy who are held up as formal agents of social control.

Altheide argues fear is the cornerstone of the discourse, suggesting individuals have been thrust into a conflict against powerful and oppressive powers and in doing so, seen through the framework – the lens of fear – all other competing frames related to the discourse at hand such as rationality, or reason, or common sense are left behind.

Ingebretsen (2001) argues “monsters” are created within civic discourse as a means to denote the threat of a coming trauma. The “monster” must be interpreted for the

masses both as a means to suggest a coming apocalypse, but also a utopia once the monster is vanquished.

Once the “monster” is identified within the discourse, Ingebretsen suggests the ensuing metaphor therefore permits a range of tolerated behaviors both physical and rhetorical to confront the threat, noting, “The monster makes incivilities possible, even justifies them or others in the name of the common good” (p.2).

Altheide (2002) employs the term “Formal Agents of Social Control” (FASC) to describe the agents of fear who, through the use of mass media, are able to define and influence the debate, indeed the discourse of fear, regarding social issues through the effective use of visual representations.

These FASCs deftly craft their message, Altheide posits, as a battle for justice, a crusade for morality, a cause to resist oppression in order to advance a new social order.

As well, Altheide argues that in order for this discourse of fear to succeed, it is essential to create an impression that an atmosphere of disorder and loss of control are running rampant throughout the society; this must be resisted by the victims of this tyrannical abuse of power by the other.

Altheide reasons that this discourse of fear would not be possible without the witting, or perhaps even unwitting cooperation, of the news media to cast public policy debates within the framework exploring an issue through the prism of conflict and fear. To that end, the discourse of fear, Altheide notes, travels from one topic to another, offering the opportunities to create not only more anxiety, but greater fear.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This thesis seeks to explore the research question of whether Barack Obama has been cast within the rhetorical imagery frame of race by conservative radio talk shows hosts, selected websites and selected newspaper articles during the period of the health care reform debate.

Van Dijk (2003) applies critical discourse analysis to the way social power abuse, and dominance, and inequality are enforced, and applied, and resisted by speech in the social and political context. He views discourse analysis as a valuable tool in exploring the paradigm of power surrounding debate, noting, “A central notion in most critical work done on discourse is that of power and more specifically, the social power of groups and institutions” (p.354).

As well, for Foss (1994) studying and analyzing visual images from a rhetorical perspective provides a greater understanding and appreciation for the rhetorical processing of the messages being conveyed. Foss breaks with traditional semiotics, arguing the process offers no means for the researcher to judge or evaluate meanings that are identified in the analytical process.

Rather Foss opts for visual rhetoric analysis that allows for judgments to be made about the function of images under study from a rhetorical perspective: noting, “Function, which I have made central to the evaluation of imagery from a rhetorical perspective, is

not, then the function of the creator intended but rather the action the image communicates, as named by the critic” (p. 216).

In applying visual rhetorical analysis to the subject at hand, Foss offers a three-step process for the critic to arrive at a judgment: 1) identification of the function communicated by the image, 2) an assessment of how well the function was communicated, exploring the connections made between the identified function and the means available to support it and 3) an assessment of the scrutiny of the function itself.

For Foss the judgments of the critic’s personal tastes are seen as “synonymous with acceptance of the function. Personal dislike for an image, then, derives from disagreement with the function of the image” (p. 218).

This thesis, using Foss’s approach, will examine, and analyze the rhetoric and images used by the opposition to the Obama health care plan to demonize the president as an “Other.”

Images taken from mass media outlets such as *The New York Times* and the Internet, including the websites of Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, and the Republican Party depicting this rhetoric and imagery will be used from a time frame during the height of the health care reform debate from approximately the late approximately May, 2009 through the passage of the health care legislation in the April time frame of 2010.

This thesis, while giving a nod to the work of van Dijk in exploring visual imagery, will rely more pointedly on the work of Foss in analyzing this material, identifying the functions of the language and images, assessing how successful the language and images were in communicating their function and assessing the function of the language and images.

In this sense, a study of the rhetoric and images used by opponents of the Obama Administration's health care initiative lends itself ideally to a symbiotic melding of critical discourse and visual rhetorical analysis.

This thesis was motivated by anecdotal exposure to the language and imagery used by detractors of the health care policy which endeavored to link Obama and his administration to Nazism, tyranny and other villains, especially Adolf Hitler, Che Guevara and The Joker conveying seemingly powerful semiotic connotations.

It is anticipated further research into these themes will result in the discovery of numerous semiotic and rhetorical codes suggesting euphemistic race-based themes to the opposition of the Obama health care plan.

After all, this campaign against the Obama Administration's health care effort was waged on two communications fronts – the vociferous rhetoric employed by the right-wing talk radio establishment led most notably by Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, and Sean Hannity, as well as the critical visual images employed not only by the aforementioned radio talk show hosts, but also at rallies, town hall meetings, and Tea Party events.

Van Dijk (2003) applies critical discourse analysis to the way social power abuse and dominance and inequality are enforced and applied and resisted by speech in the social and political context. He views discourse analysis as a valuable tool in exploring the paradigm of power surrounding debate: "A central notion in most critical work done on discourse is that of power and more specifically, the social power of groups and institutions" (p. 354).

Discourse analysis, van Dijk (1988) concedes, is inherently ambiguous, inasmuch as it simply denotes a theoretical and methodological approach to language, covering a broad range of text, messages, dialogue, and conversation exploring the amorphous relationship between text and context.

All texts have meanings assigned to them as they interpreted by the receiver of the message, van Dijk (1988) asserts. And thus, the receiver of the message applies his or her interpretation of the meaning grounded in a personal understanding of political and/or social life.

Therefore, it could argued with today's growing fragmentation – segregation – of news and information resources available to the public, that interpretation of text by the receiver is highly influenced by the source of the information, which the receiver has invested with perceived reliability.

Foss (2005) notes that the study of visual images has been enhanced by virtue of the proliferation and pervasiveness of visual images throughout society, images which she argues have grown in significance in modern contemporary culture than mere speech.

“Visual Rhetoric” is the term Foss applies to this process, noting it conveys two meanings. First, Foss suggests the rhetoric being examined can mean both a visual object or an artifact.

She suggests visual rhetoric is a by-product of individuals who create visual symbols for the purpose of communication and the process by which the symbols actually perform the communication. Foss argues three elements must be present for a visual image to be considered visual rhetoric. First, the image must be symbolic merely beyond serving as a sign, which would suggest an image portraying Barack Obama in a

schematic depicting tyranny would qualify as visual rhetoric, while a Yield To Traffic road sign does not.

Second, Foss argues a visual image must involve some human intervention to be viewed as visual rhetoric, a conscious decision had to have been made by someone to employ the image as a symbolic form of rhetoric.

And lastly, Foss insists there must be the presence of an audience to receive the image of the symbol. There must be a purpose, a selected receiver to take in the symbol and its meaning in order for the symbol to realize its potential as visual rhetoric.

This thesis holds that all of Foss's three standards will apply in this research given the vast coverage and commentary the health care proposal engendered.

For the purpose of this qualitative thesis, the primary, but not exclusive, search engine employed is Lexis-Nexis which will be used to capture references to Obama and the health care plan in references which construe racially-biased euphemisms such as Obama in white face as The Joker, recalling minstrel shows.

As well, numerous Google searches of the Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Republican Party, World Net Daily, and World Press.com websites will be employed..

In addition, a front-page stories appearing in *The New York Times* and *The St. Petersburg Times* covering public protests of the health care proposal will be included in a search of photographs and text of the events.

It is the purpose of this thesis to determine whether the images and rhetoric surrounding the health care debate depicting and characterizing Barack Obama, as well as the supporters of the health care legislation, as agents of tyranny, socialism, communism and Marxism represent stand-in euphemisms for race and racism.

This thesis seeks to explore the transmission of rhetoric and imagery associated with the health care debate from the standpoint of Foss's standard of evaluating visual rhetoric. This thesis will examine the forms of the symbols and rhetoric and the text applied to the health care debate deductively and inductively. Deductively, did the visual rhetoric possess, as Foss suggests, the same characteristics as discursive symbols? In other words, can the symbols be regarded as language? As well, the visual rhetoric will be examined inductively, exploring the distinct characteristics of the symbols.

Thus, just as it was acceptable to undermine the 1993-94 Clinton health care initiative by couching the effort as little more than a conniving power play by a "bitch," so too, one could posit the 2009 health care reform effort could also be scuttled by a calculated rhetorical campaign to position a public policy proposal as the work of a president and his inner circle of potential tyrants.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

During the time frame explored by this thesis, numerous websites and Internet searches were conducted to capture images of Barack Obama as Hitler, Che Guevara, The Joker and other images portraying the president as an agent of tyranny and/or villainy.

Such search engines as Lexus/Nexis and Academic Search Premier were utilized.

As well, simple Google searches for “Barack Obama as Hitler,” “Barack Obama as Guevara,” and “Barack Obama as The Joker,” resulted in substantial results of more than 20 pages, including a minimum of 10 entries for each page, or more than 200 results for each search item.

Indeed, each of these search efforts also resulted in postings for various websites offering Obama as Hitler, or Che Guevara, or The Joker merchandise in the form of t-shirts, mugs, posters, and other paraphernalia depicting images as each of the three fantasy theme figures.

In addition, the websites of such radio personalities as Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck were accessed, which resulted in numerous commentaries and imagery invoking an association with Obama and Hitler and/or the Third Reich, the Wehrmacht and references to “brown shirts.”

With respect to the Limbaugh website, the images portraying Obama as a banana republic dictator, as well as associating the health care plan with the Third Reich are still archived and accessible on the Limbaugh website.

At the same time, a photo taken during an anti-health care rally depicting Obama as Che Guevara is included. The photo was distributed by the Associated Press and was reprinted in numerous newspapers across the country, including *The St. Petersburg Times*.

It was from this voluminous material that the rhetoric and images portraying Obama as Hitler, Che Guevara, and the Joker were selected for this thesis.

The selected rhetoric and images represent a strong cross-section of the exemplars that were employed by critics of the health care debate to portray Obama in not only an unflattering light, but with the intent to suggest the proposed health care legislation was indeed the handiwork of villainy and tyranny.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESULTS

The four fantasy themes, or monsters, of this essay – Barack Obama as Hitler, Obama as Che Guevara, Obama as “The Joker” and the morphing of the Wehrmacht symbol over the administration’s health care logo – all suggest the president and his government are twisted, violent villains seeking to impose an tyrannical authoritarian regime upon the American people.

These images convey the idea it is merely a short leap of faith on the part of the audience to accept Barack Obama as a venal, threatening figure.

In pursuing these themes, these patterns, Bormann (1981) asks a simple, elegant series of questions for the researcher to consider. Do the same people keep popping up as the villain? Are the same stories repeated? And who are the dramatic personas?

It is the finding of this thesis that the characterizing and caricaturizing of Barack Obama as a villain who appears repeatedly in various personas all conveying a fantasy theme portrayal of a nefarious societal heavy has been confirmed.

This narrative suggests that cast against the backdrop of the health care reform debate, opponents of Obama were able to successfully transform a public policy dialogue into a campaign to undermine Obama’s public persona – to rebrand the president of the United States, if you will – into a figure of potentially violent deceit bent on assuming a tyrannical mantle of domination over the body politic.

Of the images analyzed an interesting common visual theme emerges.

Many public figures and especially presidents often find themselves the subject of satirical caricature – Richard Nixon’s large nose, Ronald Reagan’s seemingly ageless dark hair, George H.W. Bush’s angular face, Bill Clinton’s bulbous nose, and most certainly Obama’s large ears – all have lent themselves to the political cartoonist’s imagination.

Whether Obama is cast as Hitler, or Che Guevara, or The Joker, the viewer of these images will be struck by the realization none of them essentially endeavor to physically alter Barack Obama’s appearance. No effort is made to dramatically change his physical characteristics – his hair, his eyes, his nose, his mouth, his ears.

Rather, in these images adaptations have been made over his face to convey the message that this is a president with a nefarious agenda. Unlike a figure caricaturized, his or her features exploited by the artist’s pen, these images all represent a real man, his facial features unblemished hiding behind a façade of evil-doing.

Obama-As-Adolf Hitler

In the Hitler image (Appendix A), Barack Obama (Diggersrealm.com, 2009), created by supporters of political extremist Lyndon LaRouche, is viewed looking directly into the camera with a slight, welcoming smile on his face.

The original image of Obama is taken from his official White House portrait.

Of all of history’s major figures, few physical characteristics are as well known and iconic as Hitler’s tiny, abbreviated mustache.

And yet it is only the singular addition of the Hitler mustache to the photograph which so easily and profoundly transforms the image to one suggesting pure villainy. The Hitler mustache represents a universal symbolic code of malevolence. It conveys the representation of one of history's most reviled figures. It suggests tyranny, evil and most assuredly violence. As well, Obama as Hitler, conveys the suggestion the two men are virtually interchangeable parts and personalities – Obama as dictator; Hitler as the nation's first black president.

To opponents of the health care plan and for those who still cannot abide the idea of an African-American in the White House, the imagery of one of history's most venal mass murders now reincarnated as a president bent on socializing the American economy suggests a terrifying prospect.

The image also includes the text: "I've Changed," a play on Obama's campaign theme to bring change to America. The wording, "I've Changed," combined with the mere addition of a Hitleresque mustache to the image of Obama conveys that indeed while Obama may have positioned himself as an agent of social change should he reach the presidency, that change instead has resulted in the ascension of a dictatorial figure capable of all the horrors of The Third Reich, from absolute control over the lives of Americans, to imprisoning those who might disagree with him, to forming alliances with the enemies of the United States.

But Caplan (2009) sees the effort to equate Obama and health care initiative as something transcending mere political, or for that matter rhetorical, gamesmanship, but rather something far more sinister. Caplan, instead, sees the strategy to link Obama with

someone who is arguably one of the worst mass murderers in recorded history as a calculated exercise in Holocaust denial.

Thus, by associating a controversial public policy issue such as health care reform, Caplan suggests, is to minimize – or marginalize – the evil and racial bigotry, which gave rise to the Third Reich, writing: “There is plenty to debate about health reform. But there is nothing to debate about the contemptible introduction of references, direct or oblique to Nazi Germany. To do so is to engage in Holocaust denial.”

This single image is a testament to the power of fantasy themes, the myriad of emotions and attitudes even the merest addition of a single visual element to a photograph can invoke to the receiver of the message. With the relative stroke of pen, Barack Obama can be transformed from the leader of the free world to – monster.

For Ingebretsen (2001) monsters play an important role in delineating the rhetoric of fear, noting they become agents of moralized fear in political speech. Within the frame of the rhetoric of fear, the monster possesses freedoms the average individual lacks and therefore represents a greater threat to the social order, to the individual.

This dynamic is at work in the Hitler mustache motif.

Obama-As-The Joker

This is perhaps the more intriguing of the Obama-As-Evil images to be considered.

A view of this image (*National Inquirer*, 2009, *The New York Times*, 2009, *The St. Petersburg Times*, 2009) Barack Obama as “The Joker” (Appendix B) graphically

advances the theme of the rhetoric of fear. Former President George W. Bush also was portrayed as “The Joker” (Appendix C) in an issue of Vanity Fair Magazine (2008). However, the Bush image of “The Joker” is an over broad caricature, more closely resembling Heath Ledger’s (icydk.com, 2009) portrayal of “The Joker” (Appendix D) from the film “Dark Knight.”

Bush as “The Joker” is an obvious cartoon comically recasting the then-president into the same image as the Heath Ledger character.

Obama as “The Joker” takes on an arguably more sinister tone. It is based on an actual photograph of the president with the “The Joker’s” foreboding, phony smile superimposed upon the image, with the word “Socialism” appearing underneath the image. This image endeavors to cast an actual photograph of Obama into a morphed image of a monster, suggesting this is a transformation occurring in real time – real life.

It is noteworthy to observe, Obama’s face in “The Joker” image is painted in white-face with deep, dark, raccoon-esque eyes. This is Obama portrayed in reverse black-face. This is an image suggesting an African –American president is attempting, not only to impose socialism upon the American health care system, but also to pass for white. Again, for opponents of the health care plan who viewed it as a socialist takeover of a significant part of the economy and those who harbor fears of a black man holding the highest office in the land – this image suggests a terrifying double threat.

It could be argued “The Joker” images, along with phrases and other images depicting the Obama’s health care proposal as a march toward tyranny and indeed criminality, serve as stand-in euphemisms for race. Indeed, the introduction of “The

Joker” imagery represent coded messages not to support the health care reform effort because it was a public policy initiative being advanced by a black president.

Critics and opponents of Barack Obama, however, did not have the same license to introduce a racial predicate for publicly opposing health care reform, as they did in the early 1990s by associating Hillary Clinton’s stewardship of the issue as the work of a “bitch.”

It might be asked how much attention or credibility or exposure would opponents of the health care plan have experienced had they couched their disagreement with the Obama Administration in terms of “Don’t Support the Nigger’s” effort to socialize health care?

And thus the question arises whether the application of images recalling one of history’s most villainous characters, as well as depicting the president as one of the screen’s most sociopathic heavies in the debate over reforming the nation’s health care system, offered a convenient rhetorical and symbolic stalking horse, or fantasy theme, to conceal a racial motivation behind the opposition to health care reform?

The Washington Post’s cultural critic, Philip Kennicott (2009) argues the Obama image as The Joker with the word “Socialist” beneath it, which was anonymously created and released to widespread dissemination across the media and the Internet, poses two distinct messages – that Obama is indeed a Socialist, but also as a stereotypical black man posing as a urban menace.

For Kennicott the Obama/Joker poster suggests highly coded racial themes of Obama as a reckless, violent, urban black man. And since, as Kennicott argues, Obama’s political identity was that of an urban community organizer from the inner city of

Chicago, The Joker association carries with it particular resonance among suburban whites, thereby vividly dramatizing fears of the urban world.

But this image could also be seen in terms that the Obama/Joker poster speaks to a deeper and darker racial stereotype. This is Obama in white face, sinister white face.

Kitwana (2009) concurs, arguing the image of the commander-in-chief in whiteface (blackface in reverse) is an image immediately transferable to minstrelsy and thus embodies all the accompanying racist stereotypes it suggests.

The portrayal of blacks in blackface by white entertainers remains an offensive stereotypical racist image of African-Americans. Blackface portrayals by white performers of blacks was a mainstay of minstrel shows and into the early days of movie-making, most notably Al Jolson's black face performance in the 1927 film "The Jazz Singer."

Hale (1998) argues minstrelsy gained 20th Century currency through such films as D.W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation," in which blacks were portrayed as responsible for the travails of Reconstruction perceived by many Southerners; as blacks were characterized as the black beast rapists terrorizing law abiding white citizens. And thus, Hale argues the success of blackface minstrelsy not only entertained white audiences, but also provided nostalgic comfort for a time when blacks were expected to know their place in society.

For Hale, blackface provided a reminder that regardless of social advances being imposed upon the South that blacks still would never be allowed to pass for equal citizenship as long as they could be regarded as merely entertainment tropes.

And in a form of what Strausbaugh (2006) terms “aural blackface” one of the leading radio programs of the 1940s and 1950s was “Amos & Andy,” which featured two white actors portraying two stereotypical black men.

Blackface also suggests no black performer was good enough, talented enough, equal enough to portray a role or sing a song, or dance a dance and that only a white performer could do justice to the performance by pretending to be black with the audience’s acquiescence.

Sparks (2009) argues the minstrel show was created to constrain the social freedoms achieved by blacks following the Civil War by culturally diminishing African-Americans as lesser people. Thus, Sparks argues questions raised by Obama’s opponents regarding his trustworthiness, his humanity, his political intellect – even his Americanism – served to recall the cultural heritage of the minstrel.

One might gaze upon the image of Obama as Hitler, (or as will be addressed shortly Obama as Che Guevara), and even with the greatest misgivings or indeed dislike of the president, rationally conclude Obama may not embody the treachery and mendaciousness of these two real-life historical figures.

The Joker imagery, however, offers a subtle, but different interpretation. Obama-as-The Joker speaks directly to the inherent racism of American society – the fear of the urban black man.

In contrast, the cartoonish image of George W. Bush as The Joker incorporates elements of the late actor Heath Ledger’s portrayal of the screen villain from “The Dark Knight,” such as the hair style and the clothes the character wore in the film. The image

also includes discernible aging lines in the face. While hardly flattering, this image clearly represents Bush within the context of the character played in the motion picture.

The Obama-as-The Joker representation, however, makes no effort to cast Obama within the context of the film. Again, Obama's physical characteristics remain unchanged. The essence of this image is a photograph of Obama which served as a canvas to transform his image into a fantasy theme of one of the most cruel movie villains into the persona of the president of the United States.

Movie-goers familiar with the plotline of "The Dark Knight" will know this is a story about a sociopathic, homicidal fiend preying upon a large urban metropolis bent on imploding the social order in a tyrannical quest to bend the populace, as well as the political structure, to his will.

And just as the merest addition of the Hitler mustache to an otherwise untampered with image of Obama transforms the symbolic meaning of the original photograph, so, too, The Joker's iconic scarred, lipstick perverse smile imposed over the photo of Obama conveys the intended fantasy theme of a president also plotting to assume control over the populace while disrupting the social order.

As well, in addition to the impending threat of a socialist take-over of the country, the Obama-as-The Joker exemplar also suggests, Obama is willing to impose his will upon society by the most indiscriminate violent of means if necessary.

The image simply includes the word "socialism" underneath the Obama-as-The Joker characterization, underscoring the perceived threat that Obama-as-The Joker is a villainous, violent, threatening socialist.

The area about Obama's eyes is darkened, much like the mask of a thief, and the rest of Obama's face is colored a bright white. The semiotics of the fantasy theme employed here vividly suggest not only a president on a quest to impose a socialist agenda upon the United States through an ever-growing government intrusion into the lives of Americans, but also a black man attempting to pass himself off as white in a craven effort to ingratiate himself within white American society.

The image suggests that this is a man deceitfully attempting to be something he is not. And just as the African-American community can be justifiably offended by racist blackface characterizations, so, too, the notion of a black man being perceived in whiteface is intended to inflame the racial biases of whites who fear the Other among them.

Obama-As-Che Guevara

Depicting Barack Obama within the iconic image of the Argentine Marxist revolutionary Che Guevara, once again engenders a strong semiotic fantasy theme of a president committed to a socialist, if not a communist, take-over of American society.

The Obama-as-Che Guevara (Appendix E) image depicts a younger Obama (zazzle.com 2009, patriotshop.us 2009, *The New York Times*, 2009, *St. Petersburg Times*, 2009) transformed into the beret-wearing warrior, a brother-in-arms with Fidel Castro in his revolutionary take-over of Cuba in 1959.

One of the images portrays Obama-as-Che Guevara on a T-shirt with the wording: “Che Guevara Obama Marxism for the Masses,” while another image depicts Obama in the iconic Che Guevara beret with the wording: “Stop the March To Socialism.”

This image is a departure from a glum Obama-as-Hitler, or a haunting Obama-As-The Joker.” The T-shirt image of Obama-as-Che Guevara is a youthful, happy, smiling, beret-wearing revolutionary suggesting socialism is fun, Marxism is fun, come join the party – in more ways than one.

Just as Hitler’s mustache and The Joker’s perverse, scarred lip-stick smile are iconic historical and entertainment industry images, so, too, is the Che Guevara image of the bearded, beret-wearing revolutionary’s image well-known even to those who may not even be knowledgeable about Cuban history. Throughout the streets of Havana, images of Che Guevara are virtually omnipresent.

However, in keeping with the earlier representations of Obama-as-Hitler, as well as The Joker, Obama-as-Che Guevara, remains true to using an untampered with image of the president morphed into the Marxist revolutionary (Appendix F). No beard has been added. Instead, Obama is simply portrayed in a similar pose as Che Guevara with only the beret added to create the fantasy theme of a president in league with the socialist forces at work to transform America into a Marxist co-conspirator.

As well, another image of Che Guevara (Appendix G) appeared during this period. This image was of the real late revolutionary, his dour countenance imposed over a variation of the Obama campaign logo, suggesting to the viewer Obama-as-Guevara/Guevara-As-Obama are inter-changeable parts.

By employing the use of the actual historical figure of Che Guevara peering over the Obama campaign logo, the image suggests that Obama falsely marketed himself to the public during his run for the presidency as a citizen who cared for the welfare of the American people, when in reality this was a candidate already in league with the forces of socialism.

Obama and The Rush Limbaugh Connection

As the health care debate in the United States Congress began in earnest in the late summer of 2009, so, too, did the heated rhetoric to undermine and discredit the legislation begin to take hold.

And perhaps there was no more fire and brimstone voice, not only opposing health care, but also associating the effort to Nazism and tyrannical despotism, than right-wing conservative radio personality Rush Limbaugh (2009) who, during an August 6, 2009 broadcast, made this comparison between the health care legislation and the Third Reich:

“Now what are the similarities between the Democrat (sic) Party of today and the Nazi Party in Germany? Well, the Nazis were against big business. They hated big business and of course we know they were opposed to Jewish capitalism. They were insanely, irrationally against pollution. They were for two years mandatory service to Germany. They had a whole bunch of make-work projects to keep people working one of which was the Autobahn.”

And later in the same broadcast, Limbaugh added; “They [Nazis] were for abortion and euthanasia of the undesirables as we all know and they were for cradle-to-grave nationalized health care.”

Language can convey a strong, semiotic meaning. As Bormann notes, the use of words and phrases can conjure up vivid imagery, which lend themselves to the fantasy theme construct. With repeated references to Hitler and Nazis and by linking these rhetorical frames to Obama, Limbaugh is deftly suggesting to his audience that America is sitting on the brink of a Fourth Reich.

Limbaugh, by using radio’s role as the theater of the mind, is inviting his audience to envision their own version of America should Obama’s health care initiative succeed. It will be an America much like Hitler’s Germany, opposing corporations, euthanizing the physically and mentally challenged while offering lifetime health care for the accepted classes.

And finally, there was this effort by Limbaugh to equate Obama, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and health care to Nazi Germany: “Adolf Hitler, like Barack Obama, ruled by dictate. His cabinet only met once, one day. That was it. Hitler said he didn’t need to meet with his cabinet. He represented the will of the people. He was called the Messiah. He said the people spoke through him. Do you know what the very first law that Hitler ordered was? The very first law was how to cook lobster. They were to be boiled. That was deemed the least painful. The law was sent around to all the restaurants. Now does that sound like something any conservative president has ever done or does it sound like the things the liberals are doing all over the country? The links to show you how off-the-wall the Nazis are posted now at the top of RushLimbaugh.com. Okay, Mrs. Pelosi. You

say you see swastikas? Well, when it comes to it, you look more like one than any of us ever will.”

In this exchange, Limbaugh introduces the idea of Obama as The Other, suggesting that like Hitler, Obama also views himself in messianic terms, dictating down to the preparation of recipes how Americans should live.

It should also be noted the Limbaugh (2009) website also included images (Appendix H) of the Obama health care logo with the words “Organizing Health Care” morphed into a Wehrmacht symbol, including a Nazi swastika and an image of Obama wearing a headset over the title “The Lives of Others,” a reference to a German film centered around eavesdropping on private citizens by the East German Stasi.

A number of elements are at work in these fantasy thematic images.

In the manipulation of the health care logo image, the background is filled with a photograph of the backs of legions of German Wehrmacht soldiers standing at attention during an event, a scene reminiscent of Nazi propaganda filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl’s 1935 work “Triumph of the Will.”

The breadth and scope of the mass of armed troops effectively plays into the fantasy theme construct that Obama’s health care initiative will be imposed upon the American people by military force if necessary.

And, to underscore the point in the event the viewer of the image is unfamiliar with the Wehrmacht symbol, the image also employs the use of the more well known swastika symbol to underscore the dictatorial motivations of Obama in forcing the nation to accept his health care proposal.

The Limbaugh website also includes a somewhat more arcane image (Appendix I), a manipulated photo of Obama dressed in what appears to be green army fatigues, his hands raised as if to better position a headset. The image is accompanied by the wording: “The Lives of Others,” the title of a 2006 German language thriller about life in East Germany in 1984 and an artist who is the subject of intense surveillance and wiretapping by the Stasi secret police.

The semiotic meaning this fantasy theme could be construed in two ways. First, the Obama health plan is as intrusive into the lives of Americans as the surveillance practices of oppressive states as the former East Germany. And second, should Obama prevail in his health care initiative, Americans could well find the inner-most privacy of the homes – their private conversations, their most intimate moments – captured on a recording and listened to and/or watched, not only by the president of the United States, but also by a vicarious thrill-seeking black man with a messianic complex.

As well, the home page also includes what is described as “Pearls of Wisdom” by Limbaugh, in which he posits: “When was the last time you heard anybody in this administration speak glowingly, respectfully, positively of this country? It doesn’t happen” (Limbaugh, 2010).

To that end, the Limbaugh website during this period contained additional images (Appendix J) of the seal of the nation with an eagle positioned behind the Obama campaign logo and the wording: United Socialist States of America.

Additionally, the website includes an image (Appendix K) of Obama dressed in what can best be described as a the uniform of a banana republic despot, with the Obama campaign symbol affixed to his chest as if it were a military decoration.

In this image, Obama stands near two language cues: UAW, which stands for the United Auto Workers, and the word Chrysler. This would seem to suggest the despotic Obama is in league with a liberal labor union, while the presence of the word Chrysler refers to the \$7 billion financial bail-out the company received from the federal government to avoid bankruptcy in 2009. By positioning Obama in a military uniform the image lends itself to the suggestion the leader of the country, like many dictatorships around the world, also holds a military rank.

The combined messages here suggest that not only does Obama want to socialize the American health care system, but this also is only the first step toward imposing dictatorial, tyrannical rule over the country in which the streets will be patrolled by military units and the privacy of citizens will be constantly monitored by the government.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

As Ingebretsen (2001) observes, the language of “monsters” pulls together bits and pieces of information combined with the anxiety over uncertainty to intimidate and instill fear. The emergence of the Obama Administration’s proposal to overhaul the nation’s health care system, therefore, was a tailor-made issue for extreme elements of the political right to generate fear and apprehension over the initiative.

Combine a complex public policy question with the leadership of the nation’s first black president, and the potential to exploit opposition along unspoken racial lines was evident.

This thesis has shown the opposition to the health care debate included a strong racial component. And since none of the critics of the Obama plan overtly raised the race card as a means to discredit the health care plan, it is clearly true that a prima facie case remains elusive.

However, the evidence indicates that given the tone and tenor of the imagery and language used by opponents of the health care initiative as explored in this thesis, a reasonable circumstantial case can be made that a racial motive lurked behind the campaign to discredit the health care plan.

Applying Foss’s three-step process for evaluating the effectiveness of a rhetorical image frame, the association of Barack Obama with Hitler and Che Guevara and “The

Joker” – villains real and imagined – was clearly defined and offered a powerful, visceral functionality.

First, according to Foss’s three-step process, these images were designed to function as a vehicle to foment fear, in this case the fear of impending tyranny. Second, they were deftly communicated across a wide variety of platforms from websites, to right-wing talk radio, to placards and signs prominently displayed at anti-health care rallies across the nation, which were then eventually given play on television and in print. And thirdly, these images clearly lend themselves to a logical interpretation of their functionality.

To those already fearful of a government take-over of the health care system and/or ill-at- ease with the thought of a black president having so much power over their lives, these images provided a strong rationale to validate those fears.

At the same time, these images were widely propagated by way of some of the nation’s most well-known right-wing conservative radio voices, who also advanced the theme of “Obama as Hitler” across respective websites. In addition, the images of Obama as Hitler, Guevara and “The Joker” received wide exposure as they were exhibited at anti-health care rallies and town hall meetings throughout the summer of 2009. And thus, this meets Foss’s second standard of how the function of disseminating the negative images was communicated.

Foss’s third standard is an assessment of the scrutiny of the function itself. Therefore, as effective as the negative campaign against the health care initiative might have been, it could be viewed as a cynical, manipulation of public opinion, exploiting the fears and historical illiteracy of the populace in order to achieve a political advantage.

This is an essential point.

This thesis research question asked whether the resistance to Barack Obama's health care plan contained within it a predicate of unspoken racial bias articulated by way of premeditated manipulations of Obama's image in order to stoke fear and anxiety among those who opposed the health plan.

This thesis found the answer was yes.

The research suggests a number of additional areas for scholarship related to the issues raised here. To be sure, the work of Bormann, Altheide, and others in the area of fantasy themes and the manipulation of fear offers fertile ground for further research of how the attitudes of groups of people can be manipulated by sophisticated communicators.

At the same time, this thesis speaks to a potential crisis in civic literacy and history education in the United States. Would images of Obama-as-Hitler, for example enjoy the resonance they did if Americans were better informed about the history of World War II, how Hitler came to power in Germany, and how in deeper terms tyrannical governments actually function?

And indeed if Americans were better informed about the world around them, and the history which has created that world, would figures such as Rush Limbaugh and others on the radio dial continue to enjoy the same level of prominence and influence they presently wield?

There are no easy answers to these questions. After all, even the populace of the most literate society can be emotionally manipulated. Adolf Hitler himself rose to power in a Germany that valued education.

Or put another way, savvy communications skills do not necessarily translate into effective citizenship.

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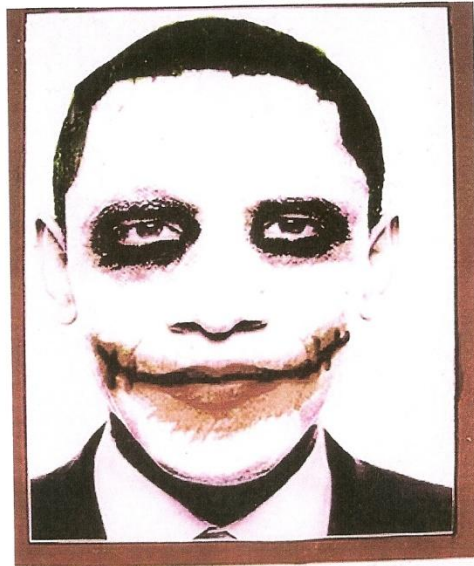
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Obama as Hitler

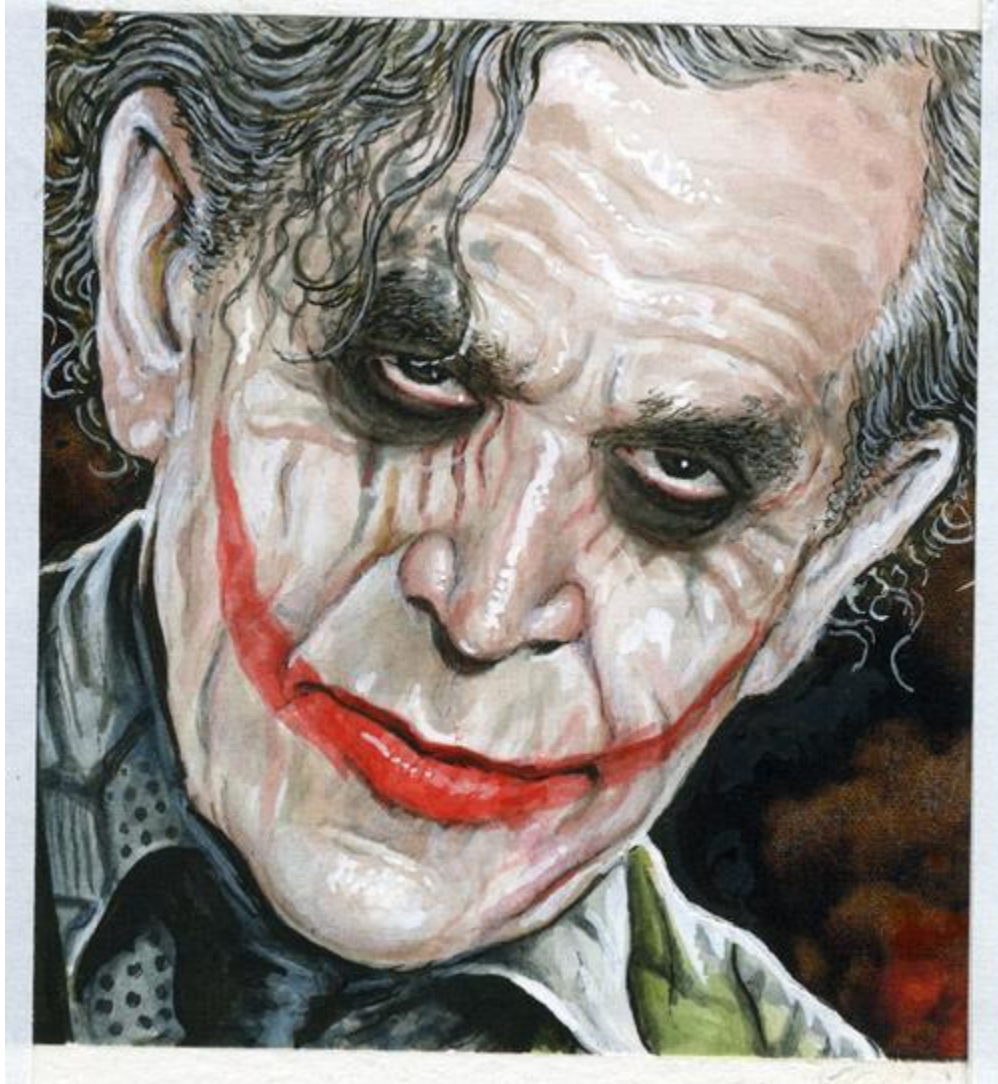


Appendix B: Obama as The Joker



socialism

Appendix C: George W. Bush as The Joker



Appendix D: Heath Ledger as The Joker



Appendix E: Obama as Che Guevara T-Shirt



Appendix F: Obama as Che Guevara Placard



Associated Press
Demonstrators protest on Capitol Hill on Saturday against President Barack Obama. Protesters expressed anger at health care legislation and support for low taxes and smaller government.

Appendix G: Che Guevara Obama Campaign Logo



Appendix H: Obama Health Care Logo/Wehrmacht Symbol



Appendix I: Obama/The Lives of Others



Appendix J: United Socialist States of America



Appendix K: Obama Dictator

