

Defining The Hero By Creating The Villain

✘ Film critic Roger Ebert once said, “Each film is only as good as its villain. Since the heroes and the gimmicks tend to repeat from film to film, only a great villain can transform a good try into a triumph.”

Not only does that point apply to movies, but as we’re finding out with the Obama administration, it also applies to politics.

During the 2008 campaign, Barack Obama’s selling points were not based on policy or experience. They were based on himself. He was an energetic, likable newcomer who captured the imagination of an electorate that was war-weary, panicked by the economic crisis, and ready for change. Much like the protagonist in a film, he was introduced to the audience in a positive light, sparking interest and a curiosity for what his character would achieve.

Once in office, it was time for the plot to develop. I believe the administration predicted early on that much of the country wasn’t ready for their style of progressive change. They had a likeable hero but anticipation of a poorly received storyline is what seemed to lead to the creation of Obama’s first foil. No, I’m not talking about George W. Bush. Bush has always been a handy figure to go back and blame as part of a sub-plot, just like large corporations and Wall Street. Bush, however, wouldn’t have been effective as an active threat to the Obama agenda. Someone else was required.

When conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh stated, “I hope he fails” in regard to what he predicted was Obama’s drive toward socialism, Democratic strategists’ began to salivate. They had found their first villain. Despite the fact that far more

provocative statements had been made about President Bush by left-wing commentators (almost on a daily basis during much of his presidency), the administration and news media created a national narrative of Limbaugh's comments. Limbaugh was the bad guy, unwilling to give the new guy a chance. The story seemed to garnish more media headlines than the freshly-passed, controversial stimulus bill. I don't think that was by accident.

Months later, when the Obamacare bill was being debated in Washington, and images of angry constituents shouting at their elected officials were still all over cable news, a new villain was needed to change the national conversation. This time, it was the FOX News Channel. In a coordinated effort, White House spokespeople Robert Gibbs, David Axlerod, and Anita Dunn went on the offensive, announcing that the administration did not believe FNC was a legitimate news organization. They warned other news outlets not to follow FOX News' lead and even went as far as to try and eliminate FNC's presence in the White House press pool. The strategy failed, however, when rival media organizations came to the aid of FNC. Despite many in the media's dislike for FOX, they looked past their own affection for the Obama administration and viewed the conflict as potentially dangerous to the free press of which they are a part of.

The first half of 2010 went by with a more restrained demeanor coming out of the White House. In the wake of the passage of Obamacare and unexpected Republican wins in special elections, the administration lowered the combative rhetoric, recognizing that the electorate was not at all happy with their recent actions.

In April, the BP oil spill hit. An oil rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico led to an environmental disaster and the Obama administration found themselves on the defensive against criticism that they didn't respond quickly enough to the catastrophe. There was an easy villain this time: BP.

Traditional protocol would have been to get the problem fixed first, then later address accountability for the accident. However, it was clear from the start that the administration wasn't going to wait. "Big Oil" has always been a favorite target of liberal politicians, so it was no surprise when Interior Secretary Ken Salazar set the tone, stating that the administration was going to "keep the boot on the neck of BP". Almost immediately, Attorney General Eric Holder launched criminal and civil investigations of BP. Obama himself excoriated the oil company for spending money on television advertising and dividend payments. The narrative was clearly to vilify BP who was indeed responsible and should have been held accountable. However, the administration's piling on of the oil giant in the middle of the crisis wasn't done in the interest of fixing the problem (which BP was clearly working exhaustively at). It was done to deflect criticism away from Obama.

Two months before the 2010 election, after analyzing political polls and concluding that Republicans were on the path to take back the House of Representatives, Obama himself went after the next villain in line: Then House Minority Leader, John Boehner. While Obama campaigned hard against the generic 2010 Republican candidates, everyone knew that Boehner was sure to become the next Speaker of the House if the Republicans won. Since it's easier to create a villain caricature from an individual than it is from an ideology, he went directly after the man. On September 8th, the president delivered a hyper-partisan speech that berated Boehner by name a grand total of eight times, portraying him as the symbol of everything selfish, greedy, and merciless in politics. White House aides posted blog items hitting Boehner on his ideas for the economic recovery. Press Secretary Robert Gibbs mocked Boehner in his daily briefings while Obama and other Democrats teased him about his tanned skin. An anonymous White House senior aide explained to the Los Angeles Times, "You need a device if you're going to have a debate, because you can't have a debate

against a vacuum. Boehner provided an opportunity for that.” The attempt to vilify Boehner ultimately failed because at the time, the public had little idea of who he was. Once details of his rags to riches personal story became widespread knowledge to the public, the strategy fizzled.

Though the outcome of the 2010 election was not at all what the White House wanted, it opened an opportunity for the creation of a new villain – the first one that actually had some opposition power in Washington... The Tea Party. Republican candidates that ran on fiscally conservative promises won a strong majority in the House of Representatives. Once in office, they took a hard line on federal spending which proved to be a major thumb in the eye of the Obama agenda. Battles over the budget and debt ceiling forced Obama and the rest of the Democratic party into concessions that angered their liberal base. Just months after President Obama’s plea for the toning down of divisive rhetoric in response to the Gabrielle Giffords shooting, he and his supporters began likening Republican opposition to “hostage taking”. Soon after, politicians and pundits moved to outright calling the Tea Party “terrorists”.

We’re currently experiencing Obama’s most creatively conjured up villain to date: Washington. Yes, the president of the United States is actually casting himself as the victim of partisan gridlock in Washington. Content with throwing his own party under the bus, he’s now the responsible parent trying to get squabbling siblings to put aside their differences and clean up the playroom. Ridiculous.

The liberal ideology has long relied on the promotion of victimization to attract support. If you can convince voters that they are victims of the environment and government is the solution, you’ll win elections. We see this often at the populist level, but rarely at the leadership level. In fact, I can’t remember another president ever running on the notion that he’s as much of a victim of the U.S. government as the

electorate is. This need to create a villain in order to garnish sympathy and support is the mark of an extremely weak leader who can't be successful on his own vision and actions.

Ironically, this administration has been painfully reluctant to identify our REAL villains, like Islamic terrorists. Yet, they're all too eager to create false enemies.

Obama ran his 2008 campaign on the promise of an era of unification and post-partisanship. However, he opted instead to turn division into a cinematic art-form.