

The revolutionary roots of satanic panic still invoked in American politics

The devil has long been part of American political culture



Perspective by Zara Anishanslin

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August 5, 2022 at 6:00 a.m. EDT



Rep. Louie Gohmert (R-Tex.), left, and Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.) pray with other lawmakers and audience members at the America First Agenda Summit at the Marriott Marquis hotel last week. (Drew Angerer/Getty Images)



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The devil is popular in the political culture of 2022. [Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene \(R-Ga.\) claimed](#) in April that Satan controlled the Roman Catholic Church and

that abortion was “a lie that Satan sells to women.” In May, Georgia Republican gubernatorial candidate [Kandiss Taylor announced](#) that she was “the ONLY candidate bold enough to stand up to the Luciferian Cabal.” That same month, [QAnon popularized ideas](#) about the return of the 1980s “satanic panic,” a moral uproar over unsubstantiated reports of satanic ritual child abuse. “Satanic panic” also trended on Twitter in July in reaction to season four of the Netflix show “Stranger Things,” which includes a plotline about “The Hellfire Club” that plays Dungeons & Dragons and is set, like the original satanic panic, in the 1980s.

But the roots of Americans invoking the devil for political purposes go far deeper than the 1980s. They reach all the way back to the American Revolution. Understanding this history broadens our comprehension not just of the Revolutionary era, but of how and why connections between religion and politics persist to this day in a nation in which church and state are ostensibly separated. The history of Revolutionary era patriot use of the devil as a political device also helps make sense of why the devil remains a popular tool among contemporary politicians with a White Christian nationalist agenda.

By the time the war for independence began, fascination and familiarity with the devil was widespread, fostered first by Puritanism and then the first Great Awakening. From the early days of European settlement in New England, Christian ideas about the devil fed bigoted stereotypes about Indigenous Americans, entwining fear of the devil with Americans’ sense of their own identity, both as Christians and as settlers. For instance, Cotton Mather proclaimed in 1693 that, “The New Englanders are a people of God settled in those, which were once the devil’s territories.” Later, Jonathan Edwards’s famous 1741 sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” warned colonists that “The devil stands ready to fall upon them and seize them as his own.”

Outside of New England, the devil was important to German pietist sects in Pennsylvania such as the Moravians, and [evangelical leaders in the South agonized](#) over how to use widespread fascination with Satan to their advantage. The devil was a common, shared symbol across diverse peoples, religions and geographies of Colonial American settlers.

And colonists did not have to be evangelical, or even religious, to be familiar with the devil. Satan inspired lowbrow humor as well as fear of hellfire, and he held widespread popular fascination, appearing in folk tales and ministers’ sermons alike.

The devil was omnipresent in anti-Catholic Pope's Night celebrations in colonial Boston and elsewhere. Pope's Night (or Pope's Day) celebrations were Colonial versions of celebrations of Guy Fawkes Night, an English holiday celebrating the thwarting of the Catholic "Gunpowder Plot" to blow up the (Protestant) king and parliament. In New England, it was a raucous, alcohol-fueled event. Men paraded in the streets with effigies of the "Pope" alongside that of the devil (who was often tarred and feathered) before being ritualistically burned.

When protests against the British intensified in the 1760s, Pope's Night celebrations took on new meaning. Now, they were used to broadcast Patriot politics as well as anti-Catholicism. The processions targeted local merchants who refused to boycott British goods, Loyalist Colonial officials and British ministers. No matter the shift in politics, the devil remained a constant.

But although a constant, the devil played multiple roles and took many forms in the revolutionary era.

In addition to parading on the streets as an effigy whose destruction delighted audiences, he leered from political cartoons and prints. He showed up in woodcut illustrations in almanacs and newspapers and sensationalist fiction. He was everywhere, in part because he was an easy conduit for articulating political ideology in emotionally stirring ways. Patriots used him to spread their political message of preserving republican liberty from corrupt politicians and tyrannical rulers, depicting the latter as akin to devils.

During the Stamp Act crisis of 1765-66, a representation of the devil hung on what became known as Boston's "Liberty Tree," next to an effigy of Stamp Tax collector Andrew Oliver, who represented British tyranny. In Lebanon, Conn., as the local press reported, the devil "turned up his breech and discharged fire, brimstone and tar" onto another effigy of a stamp collector. In South Carolina, he "appeared suspended, on a gallows seventy feet high" to the right of another stamp collector's effigy. And in New York, protesters hanged an effigy of the lieutenant governor alongside the devil before burning it on the Bowling Green.

During the war itself, the devil appeared when Benedict Arnold's treason came to light. In Philadelphia, Charles Willson Peale designed an effigy of a two-faced Arnold that paraded through the city accompanied by the devil. Pennsylvanians bought prints of the procession for display in their homes, while others viewed images of it in the pages of a German-language almanac.

Images of the devil united German- and English-speaking Pennsylvanians in a shared popular culture of revolution.

The common presence of the devil in popular protest, as well as in the visual, literary and material culture of the revolutionary era, reflects how evangelical Christianity suffused revolutionary politics even though many elite leaders and important thinkers of the American Revolution — men like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Thomas Paine — were not themselves evangelicals.

Part of the devil's widespread appeal came from the fact that in addition to his long-standing theological associations, he also was regularly associated with efforts to “enslave Americans.”

He regularly showed up in print culture as the emblem of the “badge of slavery,” an image of the devil holding a noose. Colonists' fears that legislation such as the Stamp Act were meant to deprive White Americans of their natural rights — to “enslave” them — manifested especially in images of the devil.

How the devil looked was important. And in Colonial and revolutionary era America, the devil was often portrayed as a Black man. [Illustrations of the devil](#) in Cotton Mather's account of the Salem Witch Trials and Paul Revere's prints alike both showed the devil with black skin. Such [depictions played into](#) the racism and fear of slave revolt that undergirded much of the revolution. It also made it clear that the devil's use in revolutionary popular culture was about more than religious culture. The use of Black devils in prints and effigies evoked a manufactured fear of Black people that White Americans used for political purposes before, during and after the revolution.

The devils whose effigies were star players in protests from north to south did not survive the Revolutionary era; their physical destruction was the endgame of such protests. And the many images of the devil published in Revolutionary era newspapers or printed in almanacs are often marginalized as bad art. But these representations, however fleeting, hold historical importance. An emotionally powerful popular culture that put the devil front and center helped mobilize people into protest and war. The devil was therefore a founding figure in the American political lexicon.

Supernatural figures like devils or ghosts often [become popular cultural touchstones](#) at times of social crisis or upheaval such as revolutions and civil unrest. They are ready mechanisms for transforming fear — of change, of loss,

of safety — into collective political response. This is what happened in the 1980s, when a modern satanic panic surged in response to social and political transformations not all Americans agreed with. The devil was a convenient stand-in for villains of all sorts in the 1980s, just as he was during the revolutionary era.

Similarly, siu, his popularity as a talking point among White Christian nationalists seeking electoral office points to how the devil continues to work as a political tool to announce both “Patriot” support of “liberty” and a racist agenda in a time of partisan divide. The devil, it seems, continues to have his day.

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I wonder if there is anything more misunderstood/ “ununderstood”/ missed altogether in contemporary discourse that “the Devil”/Satan/the Demonic. I suspect it has always been this way. We have no way of talking about it intelligently and discerningly. (Scholarship like the above is commendable, but, to remain professionally acceptable, it must not venture into veridical epistemics and cosmology.) Sometimes, I suspect, this is so not because of human wisdom but because it is the Devil himself leading the discussion! Everything has been so obscured in an arena where human beings end up lost, unwilling to admit it—or that the subject is legitimate in the first place—and prone to further muddying the waters.

Anyone who tries to address the subject properly is soon relegated to being: (a) classed with the “kooks” who dominate the discussion; or (b) dismissed as the Devil’s child/dupe ignorant of the real “Truth” by those clowns themselves feeling threatened. I think an “inner compass” or “sh_t detector” or range of sensibilities/ ethical capacity or a (baseline psychopathic) constitutional and/or conditioned incapacity to go beyond narcissism/ egocentrism or _____ is at the heart of the problem. Does the last sentence make clear the daunting difficulty of this? Sometimes I think those early Valentinian “Christian” heretics were onto something, even if they soon got lost in vain nonsense too.

The demonic is to me so subtle and “mayan” with so many distracting and simplistic popular presentations that I despair of ever fully—or even adequately—discerning and defining it (in as many ways and forms as it takes). There is an “intelligence to it easy to over-rate and dangerous to under-rate. I have never encountered any satisfactory cataloguing of it, or trustworthy guide.

But if there is a “Devil” and “Demonic”, then there first was a “God” who is more real, and will be last. I think all the posturing is desperation knowing this. TJB