

Article rank | 5 May 2010 | National Post | JONATHAN KAY | National Post jkay@nationalpost.com

# Cult of the false prophet Joseph Farah, the Book of Revelation and the Birthers who just won't go away

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*They believe President **Obama** is counterfeit in some fundamental and dangerous way*

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Almost two years after Barack **Obama** released a copy of his birth certificate — proving that he was brought into this world on Aug. 4, 1961, in Honolulu — “**Birther**” conspiracy theorists continue to claim that America’s 44th president was born in Kenya (or Indonesia, or who knows where), and so is constitutionally ineligible to assume the role of U.S. president. A few weeks ago, the Arizona House actually passed a **Birther**-inspired provision requiring U.S. presidential candidates to prove they meet constitutional requirements. That proposal was withdrawn, but similar laws are being promoted by Republican lawmakers in other jurisdictions.



MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ARTS

**Benjamin West's 1804 painting Destruction of the Beast and the False Prophet.**

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Since the **Birther** movement refuses to die, it's worth examining the roots of the phenomenon — beginning with the website that has done more than any other to advance their conspiracy theory.

A concise way to describe WorldNetDaily is that it defines the exact inflection point on the spectrum of right-wing punditry where legitimate journalism ends and out-and-out conspiracism begins. On one hand, the popular website employs a staff of professional reporters who cover real stories. But it also pushes discredited conspiracy theories about Barack **Obama** and has become a clearing house for litigious wingnuts.

The brain behind WorldNetDaily is Joseph Farah, a middleaged Arab-American Christian Evangelical who originally made a name for himself two decades ago as editor of The Sacramento Union. He began WorldNetDaily on a shoestring in 1997, and has since grown it into a profitable agglomeration of right-wing columns, original investigative articles, oddball product pitches, gold-buggery and an affiliated book-selling business. The ideology on display roughly coincides with the nativist, socially conservative right-wing fringe of the Republican Party, but with an even heavier dose of paranoia and freaked-out America-gone-to-Gomorrah sensationalism.

Needless to say, Farah finds Barack **Obama's** policies appalling. But he also sees **Obama** as a possible blessing in disguise — as someone so offensive to American values that his presidency could provoke a revolutionary, rightward shift in the political landscape on a scale even greater than Ronald Reagan's 1980 election victory. "Americans aren't political. But with **Obama**, that's changed," he told me when I interviewed him at a Virginia hotel in late 2009. "I haven't seen anything like this in my life. This is bigger than the 1960s. That was just kids on campus. What we're seeing now are ordinary Americans. This anger is finally clicking."

The next time I saw Farah, in early 2010, he was standing behind a podium delivering a keynote address to the inaugural Tea Party National Convention in Nashville, Tenn. The 600 rightwing activists in attendance comprised a friendly audience: Many of the them, including the conference organizer who introduced Farah, described WorldNetDaily as their primary source for Internet news.

Farah warmed up the audience with a joke about a medical conference where doctors are bragging about their nations' technological prowess. "A French MD says, 'Medicine in my country is so advanced that we can take a kidney from one man, put it in another, and have him looking for work in six weeks,'" Farah told the crowd. "A German doctor says, 'That's nothing. We can take a lung out of one person, put it in another and have him looking for work in four weeks.' To that, a Russian doctor said, 'In my country, medicine is so advanced that we can take half a heart out of one person, put it in another person and have him looking for work in two weeks.' Then the American physician gets up and says, 'You guys are way behind. We recently took a guy with no birth certificate, no brain and put him in the White House — and now half the country is looking for work!'"

After waiting for the applause to die down, Farah launched into a lengthy dissertation challenging the idea that Barack **Obama** is a natural-born citizen who is constitutionally eligible to be President of the United States — a **Birther** conspiracy riff, in other words — every word of it carried to a national audience on C-SPAN.

"I'm a Christian, and I make no apologies about that," Farah declared. "I'm a follower of Jesus Christ ... I want to share with you briefly how the most important birth in history, that of Jesus of Nazareth, was so well-documented, unlike Barack **Obama's**. Jesus established himself as the Messiah and saviour of the world by providing not one but two separate and distinct genealogical records, one gong all the way back to Adam, and another tracing his kingly lineage back to Abraham ... There's no doubt about where he was born, when, and his parentage. Jesus recognized those qualifications were essential to establishing his right to his earthly throne as king of the Jews. In fact, look at your Bibles. The first 17 verses of Matthew are devoted to his genealogy through the line of Mary ... That's because God didn't want there to be any doubts about Jesus' eligibility or qualifications to be the King of Kings. There's a lesson in this story for Barack **Obama**. His nativity story is much less known!"

As Farah went on with his increasingly surreal conspiracism, I kept glancing around the room, looking for signs of skepticism. If there was any, it was well-hidden: Farah's speech earned a series of healthy ovations.

**Obama's** birth in a Honolulu hospital is documented by birth announcements in not one, but two Hawaii newspapers. Every litigant who has tried to make an issue of **Obama's** presidential eligibility in the courts has been decisively rebuffed. And yet this crowd of political activists was willing to put their hands together for a speaker citing the Bible to support his contention that the President of the United States is some sort of illegal alien. Why?

The answer on many liberals' lips is "racism." But most **Birthers** and Tea Party types I've interviewed don't betray a hint of racial hatred. From interviews I've conducted, I've concluded that the real roots of the **Birther** phenomenon go not to **Obama's** blackness, but to a more complex stew: the financial crisis, the Islamist threat, the hysterical health-care debate, the rise of China; and the resulting fin-de-siècle fear, among conservatives, that the United States is shedding its identity as a Christian, free-market, world-leading nation. In the **Birther** narrative, Barack **Obama** is a sort of evil pied piper who is seizing on the current atmosphere of crisis to lead America toward socialism — perhaps even totalitarianism.

And since many **Birthers**, like Farrah, are Evangelical Christians, they have a powerful and ancient model for articulating these fears — one that taps into the cultural and religious memory of tens of

millions of American conservatives. The Revelation of John — known simply as Revelation — almost didn't make it into the Bible. Many early Christian scholars believed the text's lurid, phantasmagoric images were simply too disturbing. In his preface to Revelation in the first edition of his New Testament, published in 1522, Martin Luther declared "I can in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it" and "My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book." Even for a modern lay reader, it's easy to understand Luther's thinking: Revelation reads like a treatment for a full-on horror movie, a sort of *Cujo* meets 2012 for the age of Domitian.

In the popular imagination, Revelation is known primarily for its climax — in which the forces of God and Satan engage in an epic battle, after which Satan is cast into a lake of fire and the righteous live on forevermore in a perfect, deathless world known as New Jerusalem. But Revelation — which many scholars believe was inspired by Rome's intense persecution of the faithful — is far more complicated than that. The opening chapters, in particular, are full of obscure Church propaganda, numerology, bizarre animal behaviour, an edible book and a succession of random apocalypses — including the destruction of a third of the Earth's population by a 200-million-strong army. There is also a fantastic menagerie of divine beings and creatures. On Satan's side, for instance, there is a beast who arises, Godzilla-like, from the ocean "having seven heads and 10 horns"; a "great red dragon, having seven heads"; and a great harlot of Babylon, "arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication."

Among this science-fiction carnival, Revelation describes, almost in passing, a more mysterious figure who also fights on the dark side — a "false prophet" who "deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image." His role in Revelation is brief: He is barely introduced before being flung into the lake of fire along with Satan. Yet somehow, he has attained a starring role in many of the secular conspiracy theories that have grown out of America's Evangelical Christian tradition, including the conspiracist mythology currently at play on the extreme right wing of American politics.

False prophets pop up elsewhere in the Bible. Deuteronomy, for instance, warns the faithful of polygamous confidence men who pretend to predict the future and commands death for one who "speaks in the name of other gods." But the false prophet in Revelation is not just some wandering nuisance, tempting villagers with hocus pocus: He is a singular creature, the seductive scout of the anti-christ himself. It is this image of the false prophet that has embedded itself in America's Evangelical Christian culture as a biblical prototype to describe any charming, smooth-talking politician suspected of selling America out to some Satan or other — be it communism, militant Islam or green one-worldism. In fiction, the false prophet is epitomized by Leonardo Fortunato, the preening right-hand man to anti-christ Nicolae Carpathia in the massively popular *Left Behind* series of Christian novels. But in the real world of politics, he is now known as Barack **Obama**.

Pennsylvania-based conspiracy theorist Victor Thorn provides a typical specimen of this strand of apocalyptic paranoia in his 2009 book *Barack Obama: Devil*: "**Obama** is the weak little man in front of the curtain, while the booming voice of his Oz-like globalist controllers looms through blips on an electronic screen. They pull the levers, and he dangles by their strings. He is the puppet of hope, a marionette Pied Piper leading us to a financial and spiritual Golgotha." But false-prophet mythology is extraordinarily flexible: Many of the right-wing conspiracists I interviewed in Nashville were equally convinced that **Obama** was in fact a Muslim — or, at least, a Muslim sympathizer — who had pledged allegiance to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Iranian President's plot to conquer the world in the name of Islam. Or that he was a pawn of Jeremiah Wright and a secret "black" agenda — or the United Nations (One World environmentalism), or Bill Ayers (communism).

Whatever the details, the overarching thesis hews to the same False Prophecy myth: that **Obama** is not an ordinary politician, or indeed, on some cosmic level, an ordinary human being. Rather, he is counterfeit in some fundamental and very dangerous way — an unholy replicant who has come from beyond American shores (metaphorically or otherwise) to tempt Americans along some demonic path.

This is, I think, the element that makes the **Birthers** seem more reflexively off-putting than even 9/11 conspiracy theorists. Because their conspiracy theories essentially comprise a secular adaptation of the False Prophecy mythology, they are driven to emphasize all of the aspects of **Obama's** background that make him seem alien and counterfeit — including his father's African ancestry.

Mere facts have never stopped conspiracy theorists. And they won't stop the **Birthers**, who will continue to find an audience on the fringes of American right-wing politics until the very day Barack **Obama** leaves office. Or as Farah put it in Nashville, in a sort of perverse variation on Martin Luther King's most famous line: "I have a dream. And my dream is that if Barack **Obama** even seeks reelection as President in 2012 that he won't be able to go to any city, any town, any hamlet in America without seeing signs that ask, 'Where's the birth certificate?' [Applause]. It's a simple question, and it has not been answered!"



Adapted from Jonathan Kay's forthcoming book, *Among The Truthers*, to be published by HarperCollins in May 2011.

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