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The devil made them do it

By Ellen Goodman | September 29, 2006

SO WHAT'S the deal with the devil anyway? First, Hugo Chávez, the sulfur-sniffing president of Venezuela, calls President Bush the devil. Then before the air clears, Jerry Falwell is cheerfully and unfavorably comparing Hillary to Lucifer.

At a summit of so-called values voters, Falwell handicapped a presidential race between Hillary and the devil. Nobody, he said, could energize the base like Hillary Clinton: "If Lucifer ran, he wouldn't."

Falwell insists that this was said "totally tongue-in-cheek," or maybe forked-tongue in cheek. I believe him, although I remember when he blamed "the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians" for the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

But have you noticed that when we talk about demonizing our enemies, it's getting awfully literal?

Hitler used to be the all-purpose, generic bad boy. There's an endless list of people who have been compared, not always favorably, to the Führer. It runs from Bill O'Reilly to Martha Stewart with stops along the way for terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. Not long ago, Senator Rick Santorum compared the Democrats to Hitler, and Senator Robert Byrd compared the Republicans to Hitler. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld even compared Chávez (see above) to Hitler. And Senator George Voinovich called Mahmoud Ahmadinejad a "Hitler type of person," though the Iranian president doesn't even believe in the Holocaust.

Now the devil is getting his due. In the wild world of the Internet there are more candidates nominated for the title of anti-Christ than for American Idol. They include Bill Gates, the pope, David Hasselhoff, Prince Charles, and anyone born on June 6, 2006 -- don't ask.

Remember when Ronald Reagan talked about the Soviet Union as the "evil empire"? Evil as in d-evil? Ayatollah Khomeini famously called the United States the "Great Satan." Bob Jones of Bob Jones University once called George Bush I the devil. And George I called Saddam Hussein the devil.

Of course, radical Islamists casually label America "evil" all the time. Osama bin Laden called for a theological war between Muslims and global crusaders or, rather, "Satan's US troops." President Bush defined North Korea, Iran, and Iraq as the "axis of evil" and promised a war to rid the world of evildoers. And let us not forget Pope Benedict XVI, who recently channeled a medieval Byzantine emperor saying that Islam was "evil and inhuman."

Happily, we can ignore the Chávez charge. The National Association of Evangelicals reassures us in a press release: "NAE theologians and scholars have conducted a thorough exegetical study of the biblical texts concerning the person, disposition, and earthy manifestations of Satan [Beelzebub, Lucifer, Prince of Darkness]. They have incontrovertibly concluded that, contrary to the assertion of Hugo Chávez, President Bush is not the devil." Heck, Bush doesn't even wear Prada.

But the polarizing language of good and evil, us and them, God and Satan frames a clash of cultures at home and a clash of civilizations abroad. The vocabulary of absolutes freezes the way we think and act. The black and white narrative suggests that anybody who doesn't side with us has gone to the dark side.

In "The Origin of Satan," a social history of the devil, Princeton religion professor Elaine Pagels explains how Satan is "invoked to express human conflict and to characterize human enemies within our own religious traditions." These days, the "use of Satan to represent one's enemies lends to conflict a specific kind of moral and religious interpretation, in which 'we' are God's people and 'they' are God's enemies, and ours as well."

Good "us" vs. evil "them." This is how a handful of radical Islamic theorists twisted Islam's prohibitions against murder and suicide to justify murder and martyrdom. As Lawrence Wright shows in "The Looming Tower," his compelling run-up to 9/11, these radicals redefined every enemy as an apostate. They decided "who was a real Muslim and who was not, who should live and who should die."

In Washington these days, the White House seems to define anyone who disagrees with the president as an apostate,

or a Defeatocrat, or a fool who thinks we can sit down and sing ``Kumbaya" with terrorists. They recast a debate about strategy and tactics as a debate about good and evil. Try talking strategy with a guy talking Satan.

Americans should not fall into the rhetorical traps set by the radical Islamists who talk about holy war. We have to appeal to those people who see life as nuanced, who want to get through the day with promise and without violence.

When we resort to nonnegotiable language, we've entered the world of absolutes. And when we fall into the clash of cultures at home and civilizations abroad, all hell breaks loose.

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