

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them, and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

Growing up in Massachusetts, it was clear who the bad guys were. And I'm not talking about the Red Coats you hear about on the Freedom Trail. These guys came from the Bronx. They wore pin stripes. They were The New York Yankees -- who were powered by a supernatural dark energy called "the curse of the Bambino" -- which allowed them to continually thwart the scrappy rebels of Fenway Park.

But then things got complicated. I mean, at first it was great. In 2004, the Red Sox finally beat the Yankees and went on to win the World Series. And the Patriots won the Super Bowl! And then in 2007, it happened again, the World Series and the Super Bowl -- and then this.

CLIP: SPYGATE

And another cheating scandal involving Bill Belichick -- the deviously brilliant coach -- and his superstar quarterback Tom Brady.

CLIP: DEFALTEGATE

I live in New York, and it amazes me that people back home are often in denial that the New England Patriots are called the Evil Empire of football. They're like, that can't be because in baseball, we're the rebel alliance and New York is the Evil Empire. I tell them that when the Pats beat the Colts in the AFC championship game last year -- the one where Tom Brady deflated the footballs -- an Indianapolis radio station played Darth Vader's imperial march over and over again.

The crazy thing is the Yankees own the Evil Empire thing. I mean they literally own it. The organization sued a couple that tried to sell merchandise linking the Yankees with the Evil Empire -- the Yankees lawyers arguing that they are unmistakably the Evil Empire of baseball and should make all money on this association.

But as Boston sports fan living outside Boston, I have a hard time dealing with this cognitive dissidence -- and I'm not even a hardcore fan. ***

AR: It's been funny, I've spent probably last decade learning to gleefully embrace the nefariousness of Bill Belichick and the corporate blandness of Tom Brady.

Alyssa Rosenberg grew up in several different New England states, and she now writes for the Washington Post.

AR: I want to be careful about this because part of what made Yankees Sith-like was this corporate precision of the whole thing and Boston has become more corporate more money ball driven in recent years, I mean that brought us world championship, and I'm not going to complain about that but for me, some of that dynamic is corporate vs. scrappy and Boston sports gotten better by getting more corporate.

But growing bears, hair, funky and letting your freak flag fly.

AR: I think that's true, and I think part of what's made that transition at least on the business side and decision side and not easier to tolerate, since winning is easy to tolerate, that's made it less of obvious cultural shift that sense of raffiness you know, no one would associate Jonathan Papelbon mound dancing and marinating duck he shot in Diet Coke for corporate synergy in the part of Red Sox resurgence.

But it's interesting what you're saying, the SW imagery for the Yankees were like Stormtroopers, pin stripes, look same, this army you're defeating the SW around the Pats the dark side.

AR: Either that or they're smugglers, I could see Bill Belichick with his own version of the Millennium Falcon. He ain't in this for our revolution, let's put it that way.

Well, I Google Image searched Bill Belichick and Star Wars. Immediately, I found two-dozen images of him as The Emperor, with his hood over his irritated eyes, with Tom Brady as Anakin Skywalker or Darth Vader. There are no images of Bill Belichick as Han Solo – but that's how Alyssa sees him.

AR: You have to, you have to think of him as pirate, or you start to hate yourself as a Patriots fan. But let's be honest the real emperor is Roger Godell.

Okay, I'll take that.

AR: If we're going to serious, we can unite both sports constituencies, Roger Godell is the ultimate Sith Lord.

That's Roger Godell -- NFL Commissioner.

So why is this Evil Empire metaphor so tempting – why does it feel so good to pin our enemies, even if it's slippery? Alyssa says, we have to break this metaphor down to its component parts. Each one is compelling.

AR: The emperor as puppet master, DV as person causing trouble, the insurgent energy of rebellion, the moral and intellectual purity of the Force and part of what works well is there are bunches of little concepts, something as narratively annoying as Ewoks can be used to explain political schema.

No one was more aware of that than Jon Stewart. On the Daily Show, he loved comparing Dick Cheney to Darth Vader.

CLIP DAILY SHOW

But then he was kind of shocked when the Republicans used the same metaphor in this election video to rally their base.

CLIP DAILY SHOW DARTH NANCY + "THEY'RE THE EWOKS!"

But the first time a real politician used the term "Evil Empire," it wasn't in good fun. It was shocking, and historic.

When Star Wars came out in 1977, the Soviet Union and The United States had been experiencing an era of détente. Both sides were begrudgingly beginning to accept the other's place in the world. This push for detente wasn't just coming from liberals. Executives at IBM, Pepsi and other major companies were lobbying Washington to normalize relations because they wanted to sell stuff in Moscow and Leningrad. So when Ronald Regan said this ---

CLIP REAGAN EVIL EMPIRE

It was shocking, and immediately dubbed "The Evil Empire" speech.

CT: I did look at that and Reagan's speechwriter swears he didn't intend the Evil Empire to mean Star Wars but it happened to come out before they showed Star Wars on HBO.

Chris Taylor wrote the book, "How Star Wars Conquered the Universe." He says that was only the beginning of Reagan and Star Wars being linked in the public imagination. In 1983, when Reagan announced that he was going to develop a space-based system of lasers that could shoot down Soviet missiles – the press immediately dubbed his program Star Wars. But Chris says, the reporters were actually taking a talking point from the Democrats.

CT: If you look at what Reagan said, no SW reference, didn't make any until 1985 until won reelection, actually calling SDI, that dream of space based lasers was a Democratic idea, it was Teddy Kennedy came up with terminology, walk that back, compare to Lone Ranger or Edsel, he realized Star Wars was too popular.

Oh, that's interesting thought show how out of touch.

CT: Thought it was a an insult people thought SW cool, bright lasers in space, exciting, Reagan doesn't say anything until '85 at press club, some compare to SW it's about peace, if you pardon the Force is with us, which was never used in movies, which was used by Sith Lord in Episode II, I don't know if Lucas take a dig back at Reagan with that.

This metaphor was so malleable:

CT: You even had Soviets get in act, some unnamed American journalist had compared Reagan to Darth Vader, so both sides see themselves in rebel, which is odd rebel was supposed to be North Vietnam and empire was US military.

That's interesting, did he say that?

CT: Yeah, it's right in early notes from the movie, basically compares the Emperor to Nixon, and a nice anecdote from Jedi when we see throne room Lucas pointed out to actor do you notice shape of room? Yeah, it's an oval. Yeah, you get it. This is supposed to be an oval office people didn't get that, by mid '80s how SW took away our Vietnam angst, the Ewoks were the North Vietnamese, a primitive army overcoming a mighty empire.

That was lost on 99.9% percent of the population, for good reason.

CT: It had something for every bit of America. The South thought of rebel alliance. The Midwest in farmer's boy and Yankees thought of it as Revolutionary narrative especially as all the bad guys spoke with British accents. Then again we saw ourselves in the rebel alliance as well the final attack on Death Star based on British pilots of 1950s movies, Dambusters, that's literally what Lucas took inspiration from, he spliced together reel from British RAF movies to stand in for action.

Was Lucas surprised?

CT: No, his primary goal was give the children of the 1970s some positive set of role models and something to look up to, a story to enjoy so primarily focus on children, own stuff he knew was buried and if people got it great, than there were other stuff he was working out. He was paying homage, comic books 2001 most perfect space film and in fact reason Star Wars cut together so fast, Lucas was embarrassed of special effects and didn't want anyone to look at too long. He slips stuff in, for Sith we hear Anakin say if you're not with me you're my enemy, clearly George W. Bush parable. There is political thread slightly not enough sad that not enough people got it but he took that money, made Skywalker ranch, not complaining.

Cried all the way to the bank.

CT: Yeah, exactly.

JL: In the same way everyone in Star Wars see themselves as good guys, we saw this in the 2000 campaign with McCain saw himself running in primaries against Bush, saw himself as Luke Skywalker, he said we're heading into Death Star and appearing at rallies making late charge, waving a light saber around.

Jonathan V. Last writes for The Weekly Standard, a conservative news magazine. Usually he covers domestic politics – he wrote a book on demographics – but the most popular piece he ever wrote was about Star Wars.

JL: I'm remembered for anything for five seconds it will be for that piece funnily enough.

He still gets angry emails to this day – by his count well over 15,000. They run the gambit – pro, anti, tongue in check, wishing he would drop dead. So why was this article so controversial? Jonathan argued that we have to stop saying the Evil Empire. It’s just an Empire. And Empires aren’t bad. We’re living in one right now.

JL: I would say, I didn’t always believe this but after you’ve seen Empire for the 5,071st time, you realize things like when Vader says to Luke as they’re battling, he doesn’t say he will oppress galaxy and extract riches, he says come join me bring order to the galaxy, that’s an interesting pitch, Vader doesn’t see himself evil, emperor does not think of himself as evil qua evil. Another big thing, big sticking point and email I still get from people and I still get five emails a month about that piece, what about Aladaran? If what Leia says is true about Aladaran then it’s very important, Aladaran peaceful planet, please Grand Moff Tarkin don’t kill it. But the problem is everything Leia tells them is a lie, she says we’re on diplomatic mercy, they are not on spy plan, we have no Death Star plans, she’s lying, they have Death Star plans, she says doesn’t know where rebel base is, she gives them location of base old base, so I guess you chose to believe that Aldaran the fifth thing in this chain is the one true thing but we don’t have any real reason to believe that. The other thing you think about is what happens after the rebellion? You’re never given a clear view of what rebels want to achieve, get rid of Empire, establish something, don’t know royalist, republic, they don’t give a lot of thought at close.

In the prequels, Lucas spelled out this idea the Jedi see the world in shades of grey but the Sith see everything in black and white. But Jonathan says if you actually look at what happens in the films, the Jedi are hypocrites. They do separate the universe into good and evil. It’s the Sith who argues that the nature of power is more complicated.

JL: Exactly and one of those case where Jedi prove to be wrong, one thing that’s really striking about prequels, the Jedi are set up as fantastic special forces, they’re wrong about everything, they’re incredibly arrogant, does this planet exist, and the Jedi librarian says no it doesn’t not in our files so it can’t exist, for terrible consequences, it’s hard to look around and find a case where the Jedi are executing mission successfully.

In prequels not interested in how Anakin becomes Darth Vader, how democratic becomes empire, so corrupt and paralyzed by indecision, having a benign dictator seems like a reasonable solution.

JL: Yeah, I think that's right, it's funny you mention that, I do wonder if Lucas believes that himself or was just playing with it.

I don't think believe it, but it was a cautionary tale about partisan bickering and a paralyzed ineffective senate.

JL: Yeah and the idea of too big to govern, we look at the Senate, if you go visually has thousands of member planets, you think how could they agree on anything? It would be impossible and when Naboo gets invaded the galactic senate can do nothing, even though the invasion by Palpatine, the fact that they can't muster fortitude indictment of old order. If you look at throughout history and fictional history what do bad guys do? They want money or power, we never see that with Palpatine or Vader, they want order and that can be put to terrible ends, even get to Tatooine in Episode IV, it's not clear Empire affects Uncle Ben or Aunt until come to kill them.

Yes, there's that!

JL: Yeah, other than that, how was the play Mrs. Lincoln? But if you flip it around, AB and OW had been harboring fugitives. So things are always slightly more complicated than they seem.

JT: If you're looking for somebody see themselves as being a bad guy, Jabba is it, they're the criminals, the people who stand apart from entire system itself. That's the only bad guy, everyone else sees themselves as pursuing something that they see as a good.

Still, I don't think even Jonathan watches those movies and identifies with Darth Vader or the Emperor. You can't when every music and visual cue is telling you not to.

But we all have these moments in life where you have to play the bad guy, commit a necessary evil, or you realize that you're the bad guy in someone else's story -- and that someone else can be a whole nation. But mostly, we're all just in conflict with each other. And that's going to go on forever and ever -- just like the Star Wars franchise.

So Boston sports fans -- take a cue from your enemies to the south. The insult has less power when you embrace it. When Tom Brady got out of that four game suspension, and everyone was seething with rage on the Internet, you know what went through my mind?

Gooood. Feel the hatred flowing through you. Every time you seethe with anger, you will fumble the ball and we will run up the score!

That's it for this week's show. Special thanks to Alyssa Rosenberg, Chris Taylor and Jonathan V. Last, who loves working at The Weekly Standard because his boss Bill Kristol will let him write about *anything*.

JL: They are totally tolerant of my nerdism, I did even more embarrassing piece about Frozen, defending Prince Han, very few places that tolerant of eccentricities.

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