

# The Assault on Reason – Chapter One: The Politics of Fear

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This is an excerpt only.

Fear is the most powerful enemy of reason. Both fear and reason are essential to human survival, but the relationship between them is unbalanced. Reason may sometimes dissipate fear, but fear frequently shuts down reason. As Edmund Burke wrote in England twenty years before the American Revolution, “No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear.”

Our Founders had a healthy respect for the threat fear poses to reason. They knew that, under the right circumstances, fear can trigger the temptation to surrender freedom to a demagogue promising strength and security in return. They worried that when fear displaces reason, the result is often irrational hatred and division. As Justice Louis D. Brandeis later wrote: “Men feared witches and burnt women.” Understanding this unequal relationship between fear and reason was crucial to the design of American self-government.

Our Founders rejected direct democracy because of concerns that fear might overwhelm reflective thought. But they counted heavily on the ability of a “well-informed citizenry” to reason together in ways that would minimize the destructive impact of illusory, exaggerated, or excessive fears. “When a man seriously reflects on the precariousness of human affairs, he will become convinced that it is infinitely wiser and safer to form a constitution of our own in a cool deliberate manner, while we have it in our power,” wrote Thomas Paine in his legendary pamphlet *Common Sense*, specifically warning that the Founders should not take the risk of waiting until some fear seized the public imagination, in which event their reasoning processes would be hampered.

Nations succeed or fail and define their essential character by the way they challenge the unknown and cope with fear. And much depends on the quality of their leadership. If leaders exploit public fears to herd people in directions they might not otherwise choose, then fear itself can quickly become a self-perpetuating and freewheeling force that drains national will and weakens national character, diverting attention from real threats deserving of healthy and appropriate fear and sowing confusion about the essential choices that every nation must constantly make about its future. Leadership means inspiring us to manage through our fears. Demagoguery means exploiting our fears for political gain. There is a crucial difference.

Fear and anxiety have always been a part of life and always will be. Fear is ubiquitous and universal in every human society. It is a normal part of the human condition. And it has always been an enemy of reason. The Roman philosopher and rhetoric teacher Lactantius wrote, “Where fear is present, wisdom cannot be.” We have always defined progress by our success in managing through our fears. Christopher Columbus, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Susan B. Anthony, and Neil Armstrong all found success by challenging the unknown and overcoming fear with courage and a sense of proportion that helped them overcome legitimate fears without being distracted by distorted and illusory fears.

The Founders of our country faced dire threats. If they failed in their endeavors, they would have been hanged as traitors. The very existence of our country was at risk. Yet in the teeth of those dangers, they insisted on establishing the freedoms that became the Bill of Rights. Are members of Congress today in more danger than were their predecessors when the British army marched on the Capitol?

Are the dangers we now face so much greater than those that led Franklin Delano Roosevelt to famously remind us that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself? Is America in more danger now than when we faced worldwide fascism on the march – when our fathers fought and won a world war on two fronts simultaneously?

Is the world more dangerous than when we faced an ideological enemy with thousands of missiles poised to annihilate our country at a moment's notice? Fifty years ago, when the nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union was raising tensions in the world and McCarthyism was threatening our liberties at home, President Dwight Eisenhower belatedly said, "Any who act as if freedom's defenses are to be found in suppression and suspicion and fear confess a doctrine that is alien to America." Edward R. Murrow, whose courageous journalism was assaulted by Senator Joseph McCarthy, declared, "We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason." It is simply an insult to those who came before us and sacrificed so much on our behalf to imply that we have more to be fearful of than they did. In spite of the dangers they confronted, they faithfully protected our freedoms. It is up to us to do the same.

Yet something is palpably different today. Why in the early years of the twenty-first century are we so much more vulnerable to the politics of fear? There have always been leaders willing to fan public anxieties in order to present themselves as the protectors of the fearful. Demagogues have always promised security in return for the surrender of freedom. Why do we seem to be responding differently today? The single most surprising new element in America's national conversation is the prominence and intensity of constant fear. Moreover, there is an uncharacteristic and persistent confusion about the sources of that fear; we seem to be having unusual difficulty in distinguishing between illusory threats and legitimate ones.

It is a serious indictment of the present quality of our political discourse that almost three-quarters of all Americans were so easily led to believe that Saddam Hussein was personally responsible for the attacks of September 11, 2001, and that so many Americans still believe that most of the hijackers on September 11 were Iraqis. And it is an indictment of the way our democracy is currently operating that more than 40 percent were so easily convinced that Iraq did in fact have nuclear weapons, even after the most important evidence presented – classified documents that depicted an attempt by Saddam Hussein's regime to purchase yellowcake uranium from the country of Niger – was revealed to have been forged.

A free press is supposed to function as our democracy's immune system against such gross errors of fact and understanding. As Thomas Jefferson once said, "Error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it." So what happened? Why does our immune system no longer operate as it once did? For one thing, there's been a dramatic change in the nature of what philosopher Jürgen Habermas has described as "the structure of the public forum." As I described in the introduction, the public sphere is simply no longer as open to the vigorous and free exchange of ideas from individuals as it was when America was founded.

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**Speaking on national television the night before that 1970 election, Senator Ed Muskie of Maine addressed the real choice confronting the voters: "There are only two kinds of politics. They're not radical and reactionary or conservative and liberal or even Democratic and Republican. There are only the politics of fear and the politics of trust. One says you are encircled by monstrous dangers. Give us power over your freedom so we may protect you. The other says the world is a baffling and hazardous place, but it can be shaped to the will of men.**

**"Cast your vote," he concluded, "for trust in the ancient traditions of this home for freedom."**