THE CULTURE OF FEAR

Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things

BARRY GLASSNER
New Fears for a New Century

With bail unlikely and parole nonexistent, the number of guns on the street dropped 31 percent in the first year, Fields reported.45

9/11 All the Time

There was another powerful group, in addition to the gun lobby, who diverted legislators, journalists, and the broader public from addressing firearm violence: the Bush administration. Risks to innocent Americans from gun violence were among a long list of imminent, avoidable dangers that the Bush administration chose to ignore during its eight years in Washington from 2000 to 2008, for reasons of political expediency and ideology. (The collapse of the banking and housing sectors toward the end of the Bush years comes immediately to mind as another example where sensible regulation could have prevented a great deal of human suffering.)

How did the Bush administration and its allies dispense with social issues and Democratic rivals the White House found bothersome? They developed an effective machinery for drumming into every citizen unease over a danger the administration insisted loomed larger than all others.

Through a variety of channels, they repeated time and again the eerie incantation: 9/11 can happen again.

Before I discuss how the Bush administration kept that incantation foremost in Americans' minds and public policy for a full seven years, let me be clear about the gravity of the attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001. Without question, they were singular in their horror. When nineteen men hijacked four passenger jets and used them to strike the United States, the tragedy topped one of our most enduring fears—the random, catastrophic plane crash—and multiplied it exponentially. I find it hard to imagine a more nightmarish vision than United Flight 175 plunging into one of the World Trade Center's Twin Towers while the other tower blazed beside it, debris spiraling 100 stories downward. Terrified office workers fled as the towers collapsed; dazed, ash-covered firefighters wandered through the wreckage; citizens sobbed and clutched one another; a huge chunk of the Pentagon lay in
ruins from an assault by another plane; still another was a gray gash in the earth; and all of it was replayed on television ceaselessly over the coming weeks.

In the years that followed, America’s culture of fear evolved in a number of ways. First, as I mentioned at the top of this chapter, the basic fear narrative shifted from “there are monsters among us” to “foreign terrorists want to destroy us.” In the first weeks after 9/11, the homegrown scares of the previous three decades about crime, teenagers, drugs, metaphorical illnesses, and the like seemed trivial, obsolete, beside the point. The nation’s collective fear sensibly coalesced against a hard target: Osama bin Laden and his organization, al Qaeda.

The administration of President George W. Bush quickly redirected that fear, however, to what they dubbed the “worldwide war on terror,” a war and associated enemies similar in their vagueness to those denoted in previous decades by the “war on drugs” and the “war on crime.” From those earlier wars, American journalists and their audiences had been conditioned to treat more seriously than they ought shocking statistics that were not fully explained or verified; dire warnings that flared and faded, often without any actual effect on our daily lives; and testimony from self-appointed experts with vested interests in whipping up anxieties. Following 9/11 and throughout the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the same patterns ensued, only this time the statistics, warnings, and expert testimony came almost entirely from the administration. A study found, for example, that more than 90 percent of news stories about Iraq on NBC, ABC, and CBS during a five-month period in 2002–03 came from the White House, Pentagon, or State Department.

Following the attacks of 9/11, journalists dared not question the White House’s interpretation of events. “It starts with a feeling of patriotism within oneself,” explained CBS anchor Dan Rather, speaking with a British journalist in May 2002. “It carries through with a certain knowledge that the country as a whole—and for all the right reasons—felt and continues to feel this surge of patriotism within themselves. And one finds oneself saying, ‘I know the right question, but you know what? This is not exactly the right time to ask it.’”

Wearing flag label pins and crying on camera, journalists suspended even the pretense of objectivity as they affirmed the administration’s claim that the attacks of 9/11 constituted a fundamental turning point in human history. “The world is different,” a phrase repeated endlessly in late 2001 and 2002, became a kind of password that opened the door for an extraordinary degree of fear mongering on the part of the administration, as would its successor adage, “9/11 can happen again.”

This wasn’t the first time a White House had been behind a massive and expensive fear campaign. As we saw earlier in this book, other such efforts—the war on drugs, in particular—dragged on for years, consuming many millions of dollars. But it is difficult to find an earlier example where an administration amassed so much machinery to the cause.

Before we review that machinery, let us consider the premise upon which it was based. Was the world so different after 9/11? Certainly the average citizen and even the average journalist could be forgiven for feeling frightened and disoriented after September 11. At first, the estimated loss of life at the Twin Towers was reported to be as high as 50,000 (the actual death toll was 2,752). No one knew if other cities would be hit within days. Throughout the fall of 2001, anthrax-laced letters threatening the United States were mailed to various news organizations and political offices. Though the letters were later traced to a U.S. military laboratory and ascribed to an American biodefense researcher, at the time they were understandably assumed to be the work of foreign terrorists.

But by the end of 2001, no attacks other than the anthrax letters had occurred in the United States. According to figures published by the U.S. State Department, the total number of deaths from terrorist attacks worldwide in 2001 was 3,547, more than three-quarters of which were on 9/11. About the same number of Americans died that year from drowning. Nearly three times as many died from gun-related homicides, and five times as many in alcohol-related motor vehicle accidents. In Overblown, a book on America’s response to 9/11, John Mueller, a professor of political science at Ohio State University, notes that over the last four decades, lightning has killed as many Americans as have terrorists.
Even if terrorist acts in the United States had increased significantly, the risk to an average citizen of serious harm or death would have been less than from everyday dangers such as accidents and hypertension. In a worst-case scenario, if a terrorist group were to somehow detonate a nuclear bomb in a major U.S. city, the highest casualty rate is predicted to be around 250,000. As gruesome as that would be, the nation has borne worse. The influenza epidemic of 1918 killed 600,000.51

Post-9/11 and throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, although terrorists continued to attack various targets around the world, no major events took place in the United States. Those that occurred elsewhere, while deplorable, were nowhere near the magnitude of 9/11. Wars, genocide, famines, and economic crises unfolded with depressing regularity, but little changed as a result of September 11 apart from what the Bush administration and its allies generated through a tireless campaign that kept large numbers of Americans alarmed, confused, and vulnerable to manipulation, and parts of the world under attack by U.S. forces.

The Bush Administration’s Fear Machine

From the beginning, the language of the administration was apocalyptic. “Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign unlike any other we have ever seen,” President Bush proclaimed in late September 2001. The following January, in his State of the Union Address, he announced that our enemies were not only bin Laden and al Qaeda, but an “axis of evil” consisting of Iraq, Iran, and Korea, as well as any nation that harbored terrorists. At home, Americans should brace themselves for attacks by members of al Qaeda sleeper cells who lived among us, as the 9/11 terrorists had, and could strike at any moment.52

The administration began warning of a far more distant danger as well. Throughout 2002, they claimed that Iraq had aided bin Laden and was building weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Those claims have since proved false, but the administration used them to garner broad support from Congress, pundits, and the public for its 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq. And over the next five years, as casualties mounted and the financial costs of Bush’s self-described “crusade” soared to several trillion billion dollars, it was crucial to the administration that Americans remain frightened about possible terrorist attacks on U.S. soil so that they would continue to support the Iraq war and broader “war on terror.”

As time passed and such attacks did not occur, skeptics began to ask the obvious questions: Why hadn’t terrorists blown up freeways and bridges? Poisoned the water supply? Gassed the subways? Grabbed an automatic weapon and shot up a mall? The most reasonable conclusion was that sleeper cells full of impassioned, highly trained terrorists did not exist. How, then, to keep the fears alive?

In large measure, the Bush administration relied on an entity of its own founding, whose very existence suggested both imminent and never-ending dangers. Formed in 2002, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) placed a number of federal agencies under one umbrella organization created “to secure our country against those who would disrupt the American way of life.” The mission of the DHS was to prevent and respond to terrorist attacks in the United States, because “today’s terrorists can strike at any place, at any time and with virtually any weapon.”53

One of the DHS’s first creations was a color-coded terror alert chart that reflected what the department deemed the degree of risk at any given time. An ingenious mechanism for fear mongering, the color chart reminded the populace, graphically and continually, that they were in danger. Sometimes the risk was greater, sometimes lesser, but always there was danger.

Between its inception in March 2002 and June 2003, government officials repeatedly issued terror alerts, citing “code orange”—a “high” risk—eight times. In each instance, a public official such as the attorney general or the director of Homeland Security appeared before the press, promised that the alert was based on “credible” or “reliable” sources, and offered no further information. No attacks occurred, but the Bush administration benefited from the scares. A study published in 2004 in the journal Current Research in Social Psychology found that when the terror warnings increased, so did Bush’s approval rating—an
effect that was not lost on the administration. In a memoir published after Bush left office, Tom Ridge, the first director of the Department of Homeland Security, reported that senior members of the administration had pressured him to raise the terrorism threat level at key moments during Bush’s re-election campaign of 2004.54

When it comes to sustaining fear, one scare supports another. The administration and Homeland Security rolled out alerts, warnings, and predictions of various types of attacks steadily throughout the decade. Some were laughable from the start, as when the government advised citizens in late 2001 to stockpile duct tape and rolls of plastic in order to seal their homes against chemical weapon attacks—despite the fact that experts knew these measures were probably pointless (when chemical agents are released outdoors, they are almost immediately diluted by the wind). Since the risk of dying in a chemical weapon attack is far less than a million to one, a person is more likely to die in a car accident on route to purchase the duct tape, as one clear-eyed journalist noted in the New York Times. Paradoxically, when fearful people buy guns, crive instead of fly, or isolate themselves in their homes, their risk from these more prosaic dangers increases.55

The DHS hyped as well the threat of bioterrorism, warning of the intentional release of anthrax or smallpox, though the only actual incident, the anthrax attack mentioned earlier, killed only five people. The danger of a smallpox epidemic was even more remote, as the disease is rarely fatal and must be spread from person to person. Any release of smallpox into a population would probably be limited in scope and quickly isolated by public health authorities. But armed with eerie images and chilling scenarios of pockmarked populations from the past, the administration’s mouthpieces got plenty of attention in the print and electronic media.56

Then there was the ominously named “dirty bomb,” a conventional explosive spiked with radioactive isotopes that got depicted as a rogue-style nuclear weapon. The real damage by such a bomb would be in the explosion, not the radioactivity, some media eventually noted, albeit too late to prevent bad dreams by Americans who heard Attorney General John Ashcroft’s announcement on June 8, 2002, of “an unfold-
ing terrorist plot to attack the United States by exploding a radioactive ‘dirty bomb.’” His remarks set off a fresh run on duct tape and plastic, and a number of federal agencies began stockpiling potassium iodide pills, which can protect against radiation. (The terrorist plot, it turned out, was no more than “some fairly loose talk,” Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz subsequently admitted.)57

By the time George Bush’s re-election campaign got under way in 2004, there was little doubt he’d make terrorism the focal point of all of his speeches and press conferences. His surrogates went farther still, overtly portraying a vote for his Democratic rival, Senator John Kerry, as an invitation to annihilation. “If we make the wrong choice,” Vice President Dick Cheney warned a Des Moines audience, “the danger is that we’ll get hit again—that we’ll be hit in a way that will be devastating from the standpoint of the United States.” In May, just prior to the Democratic Convention, Attorney General John Ashcroft announced that al Qaeda’s preparations for an attack were 90 percent complete; immediately after the convention, the Department of Homeland Security issued yet another terrorist alert, which diverted America’s attention away from Kerry and back to the “wartime” president, George Bush.

The strategy worked. Bush won re-election in November 2004, and in the four years that followed the administration followed the lead of music groups who survive year after year by performing extended versions of their only hit song. The Bush administration kept droning on about 9/11, clear to their final days in Washington.

Among their latter-day ploys, used multiple times, was the purportedly leaked report. In 2005, for instance, the DHS issued a report, “National Planning Scenarios,” that they said was never intended for public view—thereby making it seem particularly portentous. Somehow it got posted on a Hawaii state government website and picked up by the New York Times. Among the plan’s twelve possible terror scenarios were attacks using plague, blister agent, dirty bombs, food contamination, nerve agents, toxic chemicals, and a chlorine tank explosion. Not surprisingly, the report’s disclaimer—in a small paragraph on page iv—got considerably less play than the horrifying what if’s: “Neither the Intelligence Community nor the law enforcement community is aware of any
credible specific intelligence that indicates that such an attack is planned, or that the agents or devices in question are in possession of any known terrorist group."

As Josef Joffe, editor of the German newspaper Die Zeit, noted in an op-ed in the Washington Post, "The demand for security is like an obsession, spreading relentlessly, for which there is no rational counterargument. DHS always asks, 'What if?'--which always trumps 'Why more?'"

Americans have paid, Joffe suggests, what he dubs a “fear tax” in the form of hundreds of millions of potentially productive hours lost in security lines; freight delays at borders, ports, and airports; and lost revenues and opportunities from abroad. As an example of the latter, Joffe cited a survey of international travelers that examined factors behind the 17 percent decline in overseas visitors to the United States in the five years following 9/11. The largest factor: a perception that U.S. policies made international visitors feel unwelcome. Seventy percent of respondents said they worried about how they’d be treated by U.S. immigration officers.

The total cost of the Bush administration’s reaction to the 9/11 attacks will be the subject of reflection for decades to come. Surely the heaviest toll was paid by the tens of thousands of American, Iraqi, and Afghan soldiers and civilians who were killed or seriously wounded, and by their families, and the trillions of dollars the United States spent is hardly trivial. Harder to measure are the losses in civil liberties from the USA Patriot Act. Signed into law by President Bush in October 2001, the act gave broad surveillance powers to intelligence agencies. To those who protested the Patriot Act, John Ashcroft warned back then, "Your tactics only aid terrorists, for they erode our national unity.... They give ammunition to America’s enemies."

Enter Barack Obama

A fear campaign can eventually become sufficiently stale and suspect that adept politicians benefit from challenging it. By the time of the presidential election of 2008, frustration with the administration, its terror scares, and its war in Iraq opened the door for a presidential candidate who had opposed the war from the start and held out promises of a brighter future. Republicans yammered on about how “the terrorists” hoped the Democrat would win, and Barack Hussein Obama’s full name (emphasis on Hussein) was pointedly used at rallies for presidential candidate John McCain and his running mate, Sarah Palin, who claimed that Obama was “palling around with terrorists.”

During the campaign, Obama refused to take the bait. While he never opened himself to charges of being weak or reckless by downplaying the risks of terrorism—or for that matter, other overblown frights I’ve discussed—Obama deftly mounted a campaign of optimism whose byword was hope.

His election was hopeful not just on issues, but in one important regard, in its outcome as well. The election of an African American offered real hope that large numbers of Americans had put aside the long-entrenched fears of black men that I discussed in chapter 5.

It would be a mistake to presume, however, as did a range of commentators after the 2008 presidential election, that prejudice played a little or no role in that contest. Obama beat his Republican challenger decisively in the general election—by a 7-point margin. But among white voters, he lost to McCain, and by a still wider margin—12 points. Nationally, 43 percent of the white electorate voted for Obama, and in some states in the Deep South, only about one in ten whites voted for him (10 percent in Alabama and 11 percent in Mississippi).

Nor should anyone imagine that fears of black men will not continue to be exploited by advocacy groups in search of contributions; ratings-hungry media outlets; and local, regional, and national politicians. Contrary to Larry King’s claim the day after Obama’s inauguration, that “there’s a lot of advantages to being black,” studies that came out around that time give lie to the Panglossian view. Among the more revealing was conducted by sociologists from the University of Oregon and University of California. In a clever analysis, they looked at how interviewers classified nearly 13,000 people they surveyed every year or two from 1979 to 2002. At the end of each survey, the interviewers, the great majority of whom were white women, were asked to classify
the race of the person they'd interviewed. The results show that racial stereotypes of African Americans as criminals and on the dole are so powerful, they actually influence what someone's race is assumed to be. A person the interviewers initially perceived as white was almost twice as likely to be classified as black the next time they were surveyed if they had become unemployed, impoverished, or incarcerated.63

Or consider another study released in the late '90s, in which sociologists from Northwestern and Princeton looked at how Americans estimate various risks. Whites give realistic assessments of risks related to work and health, the researchers found, but greatly overestimate the likelihood of being the victim of crime, especially if they live in areas with substantial numbers of African Americans. "White respondents overestimate their risk of crime victimization more than twice as much in heavily black zip codes relative to areas with few black residents," Lincoln Quillian and Devah Pager reported. Noting that the misperceptions come not from actual crime levels in these areas, they suggest the main cause is exaggerated emphases in the media on crimes committed by African Americans, and the sociologists point out how these biases are costly and self-perpetuating.

"African-American neighborhoods suffer from perceptions of high crime, beyond any actual association between race and crime. Even in the case of affluent blacks moving into white neighborhoods, white observers are likely to perceive elevated risks of crime. Likewise, in the location decisions of white households and businesses, the attribution of high crime rates to mostly black neighborhoods is likely to deprive these areas of local jobs and more affluent residents."64

Add to all that studies that find that black men are significantly more likely to be stopped, searched, and arrested by police than are whites, and it is little wonder that African Americans are 13 percent of the U.S. population but 55 percent of the population of federal prisons. At the time of Obama's election, one in nine black men between the ages of twenty and thirty-four was behind bars. In the late '90s, though the statistics attracted little media attention, blacks also had the highest rates of poverty in the United States—24.5 percent, about twice the rate for the nation as a whole. During the economic crisis of that period,

African American homeowners were two and a half times more likely to be in foreclosure than were whites.65

As well, there continue to be newsworthy, if underreported, health disparities of the sort I noted in chapter 5. Overall death rates are significantly higher for blacks than whites—1,027 per 100,000 for blacks and 786 for whites—and for some fatal diseases, things actually got worse since I wrote the earlier edition. In the mid-1990s, death rates from heart disease for blacks and whites were roughly equal. At the start of the twenty-first century, blacks had a 28 percent higher rate than whites. And even as prospects improved for AIDS patients, the gap in death rates between whites and blacks with AIDS was strikingly large. Blacks who died from HIV lost about eleven times as many years of potential life as whites.66

Each of these disparities resulted in no small measure from discrimination and unequal access—to decent health care, education, jobs, and unpolluted neighborhoods (whites are 79 percent less likely than African Americans to live in polluted neighborhoods)—and in the case of home ownership, outright targeting of blacks by lenders pushing subprime mortgages. Black applicants were significantly more likely than whites to receive high-cost mortgages, even where the incomes of the two groups were roughly the same.67

Still, none of those disturbing states of affairs cancels out the fact that an anti-fear candidate won the White House. Very early in that race, in August 2007, several months before even the Democratic primaries began, the would-be president's wife, Michelle Obama, spoke to supporters in rural Iowa about why she agreed to let her husband run. "Barack and I talked long and hard about this decision. This wasn't an easy decision for us," she explained, "because we've got two beautiful little girls and we have a wonderful life and everything was going fine, and there would have been nothing that would have been more disruptive than a decision to run for president of the United States.

"And as more people talked to us about it, the question came up again and again, what people were most concerned about. They were afraid. It was fear. Fear again, raising its ugly head in one of the most important decisions that we would make. Fear of everything. Fear that
we might lose. Fear that he might get hurt. Fear that this might get ugly. Fear that it would hurt our family. Fear.

"You know the reason why I said 'Yes'? Because I am tired of being afraid. I am tired of living in a country where every decision that we have made over the last ten years wasn't for something, but it was because people told us we had to fear something. We had to fear people who looked different from us, fear people who believed in things that were different from us, fear one another right here in our own backyards. I am so tired of fear, and I don't want my girls to live in a country, in a world, based on fear."

May her words reverberate well into the future.

NOTES

Introduction to the Tenth Anniversary Edition

1. Rick Ginsberg and Leif Frederick Lyche, “The Culture of Fear and the Politics of Education,” Educational Policy, 22, no. 1 (January 2008): 10-27; Kerri Augusto, “The (Play) Dating Game: Our Culture of Fear Means that We Can No Longer Count On Spontaneity to Bring Children Together,” Newsweek, 8 September 2008, p. 19. Discussion of both the concept and the book has been vigorous in the blogosphere, with bloggers offering their own interpretations of discussions in the chapters that follow, and finding echoes of my argument in movies and literature. My favorite example is an entry on a film discussion website in 2009 that quoted from Frank Capra’s 1938 classic, You Can’t Take It With You. A character in the film “sounds like she’s been cribbing from Barry Glassner’s The Culture of Fear, [though] she is actually speaking to her fiancé over four decades before Glassner’s book was written,” the blogger remarks. He quotes a scene in which a character relays her grandfather’s view that “most people these days are run by fear—fear of what they eat, fear of what they drink, fear of their jobs, their future, fear of their health.” The blame, the character suggests, lies with “people who commercialize on fear. You know they scare you to death so they can sell you something you don’t need.” http://1morefilmblog.com/wordpress/you-cant-take-it-with-you-capra-1938/.


