

## Politics of Fear

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Politics of fear (POF) is the use of fear as a tool to gain or to maintain power, particularly in the politics of governance.

### Introduction

Fear is a pervasive part of everyday life. We buckle seat-belts, lock doors, get physicals, and stop at red lights. Listening to or reading the news, one could conclude that the country, the world, is full of calamities and “listener beware!” Well-meaning interest groups want their message out: warning of AIDS, the warming globe and the extinction of species, decreasing water on the continent, the shortfall of money in social security for future generations. Interest groups compete for attention and money in order to promote their causes.

Politicians are no different. They want to remain in, or gain, power. POF implies that politicians self-consciously manipulate people’s anxieties in order to achieve their objectives. Occasionally scare tactics are effective in undermining opponents and gaining the acceptance of the general population. However, POF is not only a consequence of political exhaustion and the manipulation of public opinion, but also a force in its own right.

The use of fear to control behavior has been a recognized political tool since the publication of Thomas Hobbes’ *The Leviathan* in 17<sup>th</sup> century England. Fear turns us into children; politically it turns us into the vulnerable, the easily led. Politicians tend to exaggerate threats for their own advantage; but, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century amid all the “noise,” the traditional single threat has morphed into a constant barrage of things to fear. In every single aspect of daily life we are told there is something to fear.

Beds harbor microscopic mites, germs flourish in bathrooms and kitchens, and using the wrong sort of cleaning product could put your family at risk. Use the right toothpaste and you will get the perfect mate; use another brand and you will end up alone. All day

and every day our natural fears are manipulated for “our own good.” Give me money (taxes) and I will solve your transportation problems. Give me your trust and I will keep you safe.

### Thomas Hobbes and the Leviathan

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was the first proponent of social contract theory, a dominant influence on modern Western moral and political philosophy. He, followed by John Locke (1632-1704) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), rejected the then-current view that a sovereign ruled by hereditary or divine right and asserted the belief that all individuals were free. They envisioned rational individuals creating a government by agreeing to cede their individual rights in exchange for peace and safety.

Born in an English coastal village threatened with imminent invasion by the Spanish Armada in 1588, Hobbes lived during a period of extraordinary civil strife, the English Civil Wars. A scholar, tutor, and writer, Hobbes was an associate of Renee Descartes and knew many prominent scientists including Galileo.

His understanding of their work was the basis of his belief that skeptical deductive reasoning resulted in valid scientific theories. He applied the same process to develop his science of natural justice or political philosophy: “. . . theorems of moral doctrine that men may learn thereby how to govern and how to obey.” (Hobbes, Ch. 31, p. 287.)

Hobbes wrote the *Leviathan*, a classic both in English literature and in political thought, in 1651. His thesis is that the primary concern of humankind in a state of nature is self-preservation. Unrestrained competition for survival results in “war of every one against every one” (Hobbes, Ch. 13, p 108) and, “which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the

life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. (Hobbes, Ch. 13, p 107.)

Rather than this condition of war, the logical thing to do is to seek peace; but, since each person has the right to do whatever is necessary to preserve one's life, it isn't safe for anyone to give up that right unless everyone does. Hobbes's solution is a social contract in which everyone agrees with everyone else to give up this natural right. Then, everyone is united in a commonwealth. "This is the generation of that great Leviathan . . . to which we owe . . . our peace and defense." (Hobbes, Ch. 17, p. 143.)

Hobbes explains that the essence of the Leviathan or commonwealth is one person. This one person is the sovereign on whom essential rights of sovereign power are conferred to use "as he shall think expedient for their peace and common defense." (Hobbes, Ch. 17, p. 143.)

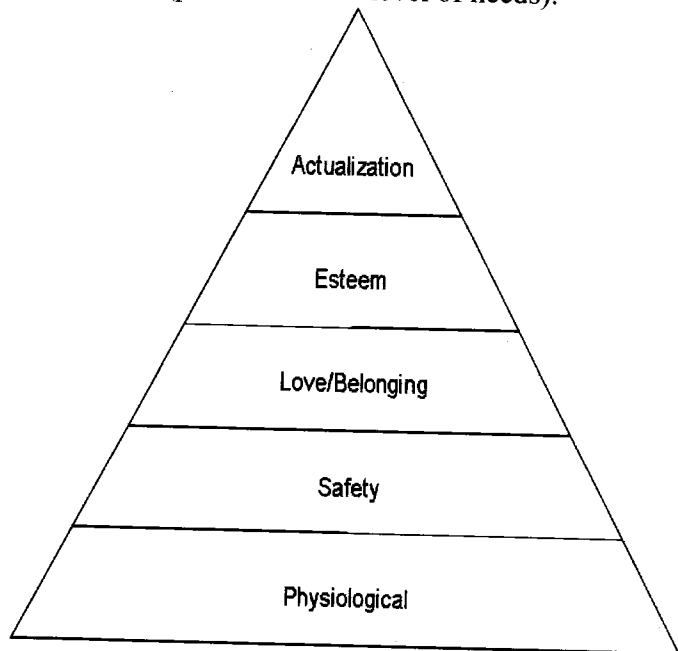
The duty of the sovereign, whether a monarch or an assembly, is to assure the safety of the people. By "safety" is not meant mere preservation, but a state in which all persons, by their own industry, can acquire all the good things they desire without danger or hurt to the commonwealth. The first duty of the sovereign is to maintain the essential rights of sovereignty because, if they are relinquished "the commonwealth is thereby dissolved and every man returns into the condition and calamity of a war with every other man, which is the greatest evil that can happen in this life." (Hobbes, Ch. 30, p. 262.) The sovereign's second duty is to make sure the people understand the reasons and grounds of the sovereign's essential rights so they won't resist him when the commonwealth requires that he use and exercise those rights.

There would be no one to frighten you if you refused to be afraid. **Mohandas K. Gandhi**

### Fear Itself

Fear underlines the fragileness of life. We fear death, power, gods, loss, and the unknown. Webster defines fear as (n) anxiety caused by real or possible danger, pain, etc. and (vt) to expect with misgiving. American psychiatrist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs

lists safety as second of five needs to be satisfied. Maslow's premise is that human behavior is based on deficiency and growth needs. Before growth can be achieved to a higher need, deficiencies must be met. If an individual's needs are achieved to higher levels, and then if a deficiency on the lower level occurs, activity is redirected to satisfy that lower need before maintaining the higher growth need. Our security, personal and otherwise, is a basic instinct. The need for safety must be met before the need to know and understand (part of the fifth level of needs).



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Fear is a physiological event. The primal reaction sets off a chain of physiological events. Facially, eyes widen, the upper lip rises, brows draw together, and lips stretch horizontally. The blood and oxygen is pulled from non-essential areas into large muscle groups. Pain response is suppressed. Adrenalin is released into the body. Fear is also an emotional event, a negative emotion. The first reaction is to back away. It is an unpleasant feeling of risk or danger. Fear can immobilize, especially the reasoning capacity. Rational thinking is unable to take place. On a positive note, fear is an advantage that keeps us from danger.

Public health notices often use fear to obtain compliance for the public good. Wash your hands, use condoms, stop smoking and those famous "this is your

brain on drugs” television ads that use the image of frying eggs to grab the attention of a sometimes apathetic public. We all have to make choices in our daily lives and sometimes fear can be a very useful tool to keep us safe. To make critical choices we need to separate accurate information from rumor or speculation.

Mr. President, the only way you are ever going to get this is to make a speech and scare the hell out of the country.  
**Senator Arthur Vandenberg, 1947**

**What’s Really Scary**

What is man’s greatest fear: violent death. In actual fact, heart disease and cancer cause over half of all deaths. We are more likely to die of one of these two things than die in a terrorist attack. You are in more danger driving to the supermarket than flying on a plane. With all the information readily available, why do we fear a terror attack when the most deadly form of terrorism we face is within our own bodies? We do more danger to ourselves on a daily basis than Al Qaeda ever did.

Deaths in the US in 2003	
Cause	Percent
Heart Disease	28.00%
Cancer	22.70%
Stroke	6.40%
Lower resp. diseases	5.20%
Accidents	4.50%
Diabetes	3.00%
Influenza/pneumonia	2.70%
Alzheimer’s	2.60%
Nephritis/nephrosis	1.70%
Septicemia	1.40%
Suicide	1.30%
Liver disease/cirrhosis	1.10%
Hyper./hyper. renal disease	0.90%
Parkinson’s disease	0.70%
Homicide	0.70%
All other causes	17.00%

**Assessing Risk or Rational Decision Making**

When assessing risk, most people consider the worst

case rather than the probability that the worst case will actually occur. What is rational in today’s world? Is it rational to fear a foreign terrorist more than the possibility of poor dietary choices leading to an early death?

The voice of intelligence is drowned out by the roar of fear.  
**Karl A. Menninger**

When planning for personal safety, consider the probability of the events you are trying to protect yourself from. Do your concerns arise from reasoned thought or inflammatory rhetoric? Are you well informed about the source of your fear? Is your knowledge based on reliable sources?

**The Leviathan Today**

Hobbes’s social contract provides a good framework for a discussion of today’s politics of fear. The sovereign must constantly remind people of the dangers that will follow if the commonwealth dissolves—a return to a state of nature and war. Today’s citizens are frightened into giving up some of their liberty so that they can feel secure. How much power should we grant the Leviathan in exchange for our safety?

During the Clinton Era, talk about “catastrophic terrorism” and “weapons of mass destruction” was common. By the late 1990’s, fear about catastrophic terrorism was being used by a variety of political and special interest groups.

The war on terror is frightening. All war is frightening. Any government that has engaged in war has used fear to rally its citizens. Support the war or you will die, or even worse, you might provide comfort or aid to the enemy. “You are either with us or against us” - sound familiar? The current War on Terror maintains us in a constant state of low-grade fear. Will we ever see condition green or are we to live in a constant yellow state?

We all feel vulnerable, but is it necessary to surrender our privacy to keep us safe? Is this a realistic choice to ask the public to make: privacy or safety? The

reference to fear in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is a predominant feature of public life since September 11, 2001. POF has been associated with the current administration. POF is the weapon of choice with those who disagree with the White House. It is a tool when ratings decline. Since the 2004 election, opponents frequently portray initiatives of President Bush as examples of the use of fear. January 2005, Democratic Senator Kennedy argued that Bush's policy on Social Security was pushed through using POF. In Great Britain, the Blair government is frequently accused of similar tactics.

The 2004 Bush-Kerry presidential campaign is the best-known campaign for using fear and terrorism to convince the electorate that each candidate would make the best leader and that it would be a calamity to vote for the other candidate. Ads stated that Kerry was weak on national security, intelligence and defense, and other ads said President Bush has made the U.S. unsafe.

Democratic vice-presidential candidate Senator John Edwards accused House Speaker Dennis Hastert of using "politics of fear" when he said al Qaeda terrorists would use an attack to swing the vote to John Kerry's favor. Vice-President Cheney at another time said that "terrorists will strike again" if we make the wrong choice." Voters received ads via speeches and television ads from Bush, Kerry and political groups designed to convince the voter that the world would be more dangerous and that there would be an increase in casualties if the other guy won.

In the campaign in England preceding the 2005 British General Election, commentators adopted POF as a frame through which they interpreted events. The Tory party was criticized by the police association for suggesting that crime had risen in areas where the seats were marginal. Through an open letter, the Archbishop of Canterbury urged that all candidates stop using fear-driven politics. Candidates frequently accused one another of using the fear card.

Politicians lack vision argues Frank Furedi in Politics of Fear. Political jargon is low on specifics and high in rhetoric. Political vocabulary is designed to obscure the truth and to distract from underlying ideas and that there are no BIG IDEAS. With no vision there is little to change. There is a loss of effectiveness in govern-

ment. Policies are no longer the result of thoughtful debate but rather the result of fiddling with policies, making little adjustments and thinking that dilemmas are created by global forces and are beyond anyone's control.

There is a pervading sense of underestimating human capabilities. In Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan's time, a feeling that "there is no alternative," known as TINA, implied a lack of choice which in turn indicates the *end of political discussion*. This is fatalistic. The American presidential campaigns of 2000 and 2004 lacked substance. There was no "platform" either by the candidates or the political parties. Peoples' identities and lifestyles have become politicized. Same sex marriage, religion, working parents, and guns have become debate issues. Politicians do not persuade: they sell ads on television.

In the chaos that followed the flooding of New Orleans in 2005, many people wanted the President to send in the military to control the situation. As the populace descended into fear there were calls for strong, forceful leadership. Because of the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878, the president was unable to send in the military to enforce civil laws. The Posse Comitatus Act prohibits using the Army to enforce civilian law without a specific act of Congress.

### Conclusion

When applied to politics, fear cancels choice and provides an "either - or" situation. Who do we think will keep us free from terror? If we question current politics, are we giving aid and comfort to the enemy? Does giving up freedom of speech guarantee us freedom from terror? Where do we draw the line? These are difficult questions with no easy answers. Do we understand the political implications of fear?

Fear is a mental and physical reaction. Natural, healthy fear warns us to avoid pain. We fear that which could inflict pain on us by others who wish to harm or kill us. Politically, we fear for ourselves and for our neighbors.

As threats are thrown around with wild abandon, one should remember that there is always an alternative. Even if a choice does not seem readily available, there are always choices and the one we select depends on

whether we see ourselves as vulnerable or resilient. Furedi says we can succumb to a culture of fatalism or we can take a positive approach by believing in human resourcefulness and by engaging in the political process. Only a positive, deliberative approach can effectively respond to the emotional panic created by the politics of fear.

There is a critical need for citizens' voices in this ongoing public discourse and an equally critical need for citizens to act as watchdogs to ensure that the integrity of our democracy is preserved.

LWVUS President Kay J. Maxwell

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