

The American Bogeyman Syndrome

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Losing Control of the American Fear Machine

Fear has always been a tool of the vested interests to retain power, make money, and keep the masses under control. But now things may be veering off the rails.

The old fears deployed by the nation's power centers during and after the Cold War—commies and terrorists—are reliably set, with the levers of power fueling and cooling down as needed. There's always been an element of manipulation at work, as evil and insidious as that is (think Condoleezza Rice's "mushroom cloud"), but it's been one that's maintained a strategic balance. You want enough fear to make people compliant, but not so much that they end up chasing each other—or their leaders—with pitchforks or driving cars through crowds of protesters.

It is now too easy for too many people to pour fuel on fires, with seemingly no interest in putting them out, ever. The establishment media, which once thrived on information gathering and reporting, now peddles in anxiety promotion, thanks largely to social media like Facebook and Twitter. Confirmation of our greatest fears rocket across multilayered platforms 24/7, unfiltered and unfettered, tailored to match what scares us most. Then we retweet and share to like-minded others to validate our fears and form bonded communities. These are deep waters: imagine an episode of Black Mirror where a device that algorithmically learns your deepest fears falls into the wrong hands.

There's a history to all of this. We first got really scared just as we were emerging as the predominant power on the planet, armed with the world's only atomic bomb. Hence why we rewarded president after president for building and maintaining the most massive national security state ever known to make us feel safe.

In the meantime we were instructed to be afraid of all sorts of stuff—communists in government and Hollywood, domino theories, revolutionary movements, a whole basket of Bond villains. Those who supported peace were accused of working for the enemy. Pretty much anything the people in charge wanted to do—distort civil liberties, raise taxes to pay for weapons, overthrow governments, punish Americans for things they wrote or said—was widely supported because we were afraid of what might happen otherwise. Most people now realize that this fear was overblown. Almost every American who died from the Cold War died in a fight we picked, inflamed, or dove blindly into. Cancer and car accidents took more American lives than Dr. Strangelove.

Then we got really scared following September 11, 2001, more than we ever were during the Cold War. Republican leaders, their war-hawk operators, and Beltway bandits convinced Americans that the terrorists lived among us, controlled by masterminds in mosques here and overseas, simultaneously unpredictable and devious plotters playing the long game. They could turn our children into jihadis via Facebook. Warnings like "if you are not with us you're against us" soon turned into "you shouldn't worry if you don't have anything to hide," as the national security state metastasized. In the end, diabetes and ladder falls took more American lives than Osama bin Laden or any of his al Qaeda offshoots.

For a long time we've been acting like a shelter dog when the Bad Man comes into the room. The difference is that we're always driven by anxiety more or less in the same direction, a straight line that can't be anything but purposeful.

The nasty twist for 2018 is that we live in a world with a mainstream media that has barely screened ideological biases, backed up by social media exhibiting barely contained mental instability. We are ever more diverse and ever more separated at the same time, divided into a thousand socially isolating sub-reddits. It isn't practical anymore for us to have common fears.

Fear is powerful. A sound triggers a memory that sets off involuntary, subconscious processes: the heart rate jumps, muscles twitch, higher brain functions switch to fight-or-flight. Live in this state long enough and you end up with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the inability to control your reaction to certain stimuli. Imagine a whole country that way, trying to make good decisions while the lizard brain trumps rational thinking.

Looking at a blog post from a few years ago about what we were afraid of then, there are some familiar names. Putin was going on to invade Europe and Kim Jong-un was going to start a war over a Seth Rogen comedy called *The Interview*. But there were no mainstream claims that the president was unfit; people who thought so were pushed aside as conspiracy theorists and dismissed as "birthers." There was no widespread anxiety over whether democracy was teetering; those who talked about coups and the Reichstag burning were mocked on reality TV as preppers. There was a kind of consensus on what to be afraid of and when.

Now there is a fear for everyone. We're afraid Trump will start a war with North Korea (Kim is the sane one). We're also afraid he won't start a war and they'll get us first (Kim is the crazy one). We're afraid Trump is a Russian spy slipped into the White House (end of democracy) and we're afraid the Democrats are using Mueller to overturn a legitimate election (end of democracy). We're worried the fascist government is taking away free speech and we're worried the government isn't doing enough to suppress free speech to stop hate. There are too many guns for us to be safe and not enough guns to protect us. Elect more women or women's rights are finished. If we do elect more women (or POC, LGBTQ, etc.) the rest of us are finished.

We never find time to exhale. So while the story used to be the tamping down of tensions on the Korean peninsula, the headline now is how the mentally ill Trump might just push the nuclear button anyway, maybe even tonight (better check Twitter). Whatever matters to you—transgender toilet rights, abortion, guns, religion—is under lethal attack. It is always condition yellow, fight or flight. Fear is primitive; it doesn't matter what we fear so long as we remain afraid.

Trump is not the demagogue you fear, just a cruder version of what has been the norm for decades. The thing to be scared of is what emerges after him. As such, there is still time. His bizarre ascension to the world's most powerful office could become the argumentum ad absurdum that pulls the curtain back, Oz-like, on the way fear has been used to manipulate us. The risk is that Trump could also become a wake-up call of a different sort, to even worse and much smarter people, who will cross the line from manipulation to exploitation (the real burning of the Reichstag scenario), from gross but recognizable stasis into chaos.

Frightened enough, people will accept, if not demand, extreme and dangerous solutions to problems whose true direness exists mostly within their anxieties. Remember the way fear of invasion following Pearl Harbor led us to unlawfully imprison American citizen shopkeepers and farmers of Japanese origin? Now that's something to really be afraid of.

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