

The Power of Exaggerated Fear

As the American middle class shrinks and citizens feel vulnerable and angry, politicians have found that exaggerating the dangers from some bogeyman “the Muslim terrorists are out to get you!” works wonders in distracting them from far more serious threats, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar describes.

By Paul R. Pillar

Journalists have noticed how much current political campaigns are trading on fear. As observed in [a recent article](#) in the *Washington Post*, “Most of the Republican presidential contenders and their allies are now waging campaigns focused on fear, bombarding voters with ominous television spots that warn of national security threats and amping up their alarming rhetoric on the stump.”

ISIS and foreign terrorism figure prominently in the bombardment. As a media tracker cited in the same article observes, such scare tactics usually don’t get relied on until late in an election campaign. (The famous [“Daisy” ad](#) that Lyndon Johnson’s campaign used to associate Barry Goldwater with nuclear war in 1964 aired only once, in September of that year.)

But in the current campaign, the GOP candidates are trying to outdo each other with the fear factor as a way of getting attention before the primaries have even started, and trying to use the scaring of people as “the fastest way to create an ad that resonates.”

There is a long history across many nations of fear-based demagoguery leading to extreme and sometimes disastrous political results. Even if that isn’t the result in this U.S. election year, even if the candidates using the scare candidates do not really believe their rhetoric, and even if any one of them, once in office, would try to take a less fearful and more measured approach to business, the rhetoric and the public fear that it stokes have consequences. They help to create a political milieu in which anyone in office will have to operate.

The rhetoric of fear promotes emotion rather than clear thinking as the prime shaper of public attitudes. It engages the amygdala rather than the cortex. That is not what makes for sound policy, or for the sort of political environment that supports sound policy.

The rhetoric exacerbates mass misperception of the seriousness of whatever is the rhetoric’s focus, with a loss of any accurate sense of proportion. Much of the speeches and the advertising would lead one to believe that the superpower that is the United States is existentially threatened by a foreign group such as

ISIS, when in fact that is nowhere near the case.

The loss of proportion discourages sober consideration of the trade-offs inevitably involved in national security policy and encourages exaggerated swings of the pendulum in which fearful Americans accept compromises to their liberty and privacy that they will oppose once the fear subsides.

The loss of proportion also encourages lashing out in costly and dangerous ways, along the line of ads that link the San Bernardino shooters to a supposed need to use more military force against a group like ISIS in the Middle East, even though the only link in real life was a shooter's invoking of the brand name of ISIS.

Disproportionate focus by the fear-mongers on the scary topics they choose leads to distortion of, or insufficient attention to, related issues. This has been happening to a large degree with the issue of gun control, which often gets portrayed as an alternative to combating terrorism, despite an incident such as the San Bernardino shooting, which *was* an instance of mass murder in the United States with firearms, and *was not* the work of a foreign terrorist group.

A similar process has been involved in the insufficient attention given to violent antigovernment groups in the United States, which have accounted for the major share of political violence committed within the United States over the past decade and are a growing problem.

Because bandwidth is limited with both public emotions and serious policy analysis, the focus on fear also crowds out attention to unrelated issues. For example, Sen. Marco Rubio says in one of his ads, "While ISIS is beheading people and burning them in cages, he [President Obama] says climate change is our greatest threat." That's right, Senator, it is; climate change is on track to cause far greater harm to Americans as well as to others than ISIS will ever be capable of doing.

Beyond the effects on domestic policy debate are the untoward effects overseas of the highly salient fear-inducing rhetoric. This includes accentuating perceptions of the United States as a threatening, Islamophobic power, along with foreign reactions to those perceptions that redound to the disadvantage of U.S. interests and the security of U.S. citizens.

Such perceptions and reactions are exactly what ISIS wants from the United States, as a tool for recruitment and a stimulus to more damage that might be inflicted independently but in its name inside the United States.

Traditionally the main worries about lingering ill effects of a political campaign concern specific campaign promises and commitments that the successful

candidate carries with him or her into office and might work much less well as policy than as a campaign applause line. There certainly are good reasons to worry about that sort of problem with the current campaign, regarding both foreign policy and domestic matters such as the fiscal health of the country.

But we also should worry about the broader public mood and political milieu that represent the leftovers from the campaign and that even the most flip-flop-friendly politician may have difficulty changing once in office.

The fear-mongering about threats from abroad is the most significant such worry with this year's campaign. We have seen this sort of thing before, but it is at least as bad this year as it has been in most elections in recent memory.

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