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culture of fear and the presidential scare

by barry glassner

The term “culture of fear” has become part of the national lexicon, referenced regularly in academia, on mainstream news outlets, and social media. Scholarly journals publish papers with titles like “The Culture of Fear and the Politics of Education,” while popular magazines like *Newsweek* print essays such as “The (Play) Dating Game: Our Culture of Fear Means That We Can No Longer Count on Spontaneity.” More recently following a string of resignations in the Trump administration in 2018, CNN ran stories about “a culture of fear inside the White House.”

The 2010 edition of my book *The Culture of Fear* ended with a quote from Michelle Obama explaining why she let her husband run for President: “I am so tired of fear, and I don’t want my girls to live in a country, in a world, based on fear.” In the current edition of the book, I devote much of the new chapters to the Fearmonger-in-Chief, Donald Trump. Throughout President Obama’s successful campaigns in 2008 and 2012 and as president, Obama largely eschewed fearmongering. The same cannot be said of his predecessors, presidents Bush and Clinton, who subscribed to Richard Nixon’s precept, “People react to fear, not love.”

Obama’s successor returned to that approach with a passion. Still, it was local and cable TV news, social media, politicians, and advocacy groups throughout the latter decades of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries who planted and tended the seeds for his claims-making about crime, terrorism, and people of color. By the time Trump began his presidential campaign, the fruits of fear were fully grown and ripe for picking. Surveys conducted during the summer of the 2016 election found nearly two-thirds of Americans worried that they or someone in their family would be a victim of crime. Even though an American is more likely to die from drowning, and about 300 times more likely to die from gunfire by someone they know, a majority of Americans worried they’d fall victim to terrorism from abroad.

Trump’s fearmongering crosses previously uncrossed racist lines. Studies conducted during and after the 2016 presidential election found that holding negative or racist views about people of color correlated strongly with support for Trump, who played baldly to these biases. This is something no presidential candidate had done since Barry Goldwater in 1964, when, as Martin Luther King Jr. put it at the time, the Republican nominee gave “aid and comfort to racists” by proudly attacking civil rights reform.

In the half century since, presidential candidates have wooed bigoted Whites with code words like “welfare queens.” By contrast, from speaking of Mexican immigrants as rapists and

criminals during his first campaign speech in June 2015, to his call during the campaign for a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States,” Trump broke with the long tradition of presidential candidates who stopped at nods and winks to racist voters. Unlike his predecessors, he refused to condemn White supremacist groups who supported him and brazenly derided communities of color.

In many ways, however, there has been little novelty in Trump’s fear mongering. He deploys the techniques I discussed in the first edition of the book—repetition, misdirection, and treating isolated incidents and anecdotes as trends. He packages them alternately in the “sick society” narrative Bill Clinton invoked about juvenile crime and pregnant teens, or as the “9/11 can happen again” story that George W. Bush used to sell the “war on terror.”

The narrative about terrorism is largely incommensurate with the “sick society” story, though, in which the villains are domestic, heroes are difficult to find, and the storyline is about the decline of American civilization. In the post-9/11 narrative, the villains are brown people from foreign lands and heroes can be found, whether in the guise of soldiers on the ground or Trump’s “only I can fix it” grandiloquence. One result of this discursive shift is the putative dangerousness of foreigners, a cornerstone of Trump’s spiel.

My hope is that journalists will become more reflexive about fearmongering, as the dangers of this approach become more evident. It should not take decades for them to disavow media-propagated scares, as was the case for “crack babies,” a panic I debunked in the first edition of the book. In the 1980s and 90s, the news media repeatedly quoted physicians and social scientists warning that the infants “are largely doomed to the underclass because of faulty cognitive and psychological development,” as one put it. Headlines in the nation’s leading newspapers foretold a “bleak,” “joyless” future for such children, despite considerable evidence at the time suggesting little cause to single out these children for special worry and stigmatization.

Not until well into the current century did journalists begin to correct their earlier published scare stories. One can only hope that journalists—as well as public officials, advocates, and scholars—will not wait so long to question the scares *du jour* and the use of fear as a political tool.

Barry Glassner is a sociologist and former president of Lewis & Clark College. He is the author of *Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things*.