

REASON TO PANIC¹

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“WE REASON DEEPLY WHEN WE FORCIBLY FEEL,” WROTE MARY Wollstonecraft in 1796.² After centuries of separating reason from emotion, philosophers have recently come around to Wollstonecraft’s way of thinking. Reflecting an emerging consensus, Martha Nussbaum writes, “All emotions are to some degree ‘rational’ in a descriptive sense—all are to some degree cognitive and based upon belief—and they may then be assessed, as beliefs are assessed, for their normative status.”³ But do we reason deeply when we feel fear? This question inspires greater pause. Ever since the Enlightenment, most philosophers have treated reason as the sibling of freedom, and fear as their evil stepmother. “The motto of enlightenment,” Kant wrote, is “*Sapere*

¹ This essay is adapted from my forthcoming book, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

² *A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, ed. Richard Holmes (New York: Penguin, 1987) 171.

³ Nussbaum is here describing Aristotle’s position, for which she has considerable sympathy. Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 81. Also see Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).

aude! Have courage to use your *own* understanding.” But courage, Kant added, is often undermined by self-appointed “guardians,” who use fear to amplify “the danger which threatens” men and women as they try to think for themselves.⁴ Because fear prevents adults from exercising their reason and enjoying their freedom, reason and freedom are not to be found among the fearful. From Henry Sidgwick to the Frankfurt School, from Franklin Roosevelt to Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, philosophers and politicians over the last two centuries have affirmed this position.⁵

When it comes to political fear, theorists are even more squeamish. By political fear, I mean either the shared apprehension of a people about threats to its safety or well being—the fear of crime, for example, or of communism or terrorism—or the intimidation by governments of citizens and subjects. What role does reason play in generating or sustaining these political fears? According to many writers, very little. Raymond Aron deemed political fear a “primal, and to speak, subpolitical emotion,” precluding the presence of mind reason requires. Judith Shklar described political fear as a “physiological reaction”—“involuntary and far too imperious to be controlled”—to brute force. As a response to weapons of violence, political fear reduces persons to physical objects, preventing them from reflecting upon their choices and ends. “This is where our physical and moral impulses meet and struggle, and where the former triumph.”⁶ That, the argument goes, is what makes political fear so objectionable: It threatens a subtraction of self,

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: “What is Enlightenment?”*, *Kant’s Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H.B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 54.

⁵ Henry Sidgwick, *The Elements of Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1891) 41; Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1986) 3; Franz Neumann, “Anxiety and Politics,” *The Democratic and Authoritarian State: Essays in Political and Legal Theory*, ed. Herbert Marcuse (New York: Free Press, 1957) 270; Judith N. Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) 29; Franklin Roosevelt, “First Inaugural Address,” *Inaugural Address of the Presidents of the United States* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1961) 235; Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom From Fear* (New York: Penguin, 1991) 180–5.

depriving the individual of her capacity to be a rational and autonomous agent. Though most writers would acknowledge that all politics requires some fear—if for no other reason than to deter those individuals who would subject men and women to their fearsome power—they insist that political fear must be minimized in order “to foster well-informed and self-directed adults.”⁷ Political fear, in this view, has little to do with reason or with those instruments—like the rule of law or moral education—that traffic in reason. It is a primitive passion, roused by primitive implements, in the service of primitive ends: the brute power of brutish rulers or brutish insurgents and criminals.

In this essay, I would like to challenge this way of thinking about political fear. Drawing upon a tradition extending from Plato and Aristotle through Augustine and Hobbes, and from examples from the Cold War and the war on terrorism, I argue that while political fear is aroused in part by coercion and violence, it cannot seize a people without the help of reason and reason’s instruments. Unless political leaders buttress coercion with argument, unless they supplement violence with laws and moral education, the fear that coercion or violence are meant to arouse will be limited in its effects. This is true whether we are talking about the shared apprehension of a people in the face of a common threat, or a government’s intimidation of its citizenry and subjects, even if that intimidation is on the order of Nazism or Stalinism. (For reasons of space, though, I only discuss the first kind of fear here.) To say that political fear requires the aid of reason is not to say that political fear always renders truthfully, or reflects accurately, the dangers confronting a group or society. Political and cultural leaders can and do manipulate the fears of the public, exaggerating or distorting the dangers it faces. They do so, however, not by preying upon fear’s affective dimensions, but by capitalizing on its cognitive dimensions. Working through peo-

⁶ Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought I: Montesquieu, Comte, Marx, Tocqueville, the Sociologists of the Revolution of 1848*, trans. Richard Howard and Helen Weaver (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968) 20–1; Judith N. Shklar, *Montesquieu* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 84.

⁷ Shklar, “Liberalism of Fear,” 33.

ple's judgments about the world, leaders encourage men and women to focus on certain dangers over others, and to construe—or misconstrue—the nature of those dangers. Throughout the Cold War and in the recently declared war on terrorism, we find particularly vivid examples of this process at play, suggesting that if we are to understand our contemporary moment, we must abandon our habitual separation of fear from reason and its political instruments. If we are to confront today fear and its baleful effects, we cannot simply oppose it as a thoughtless or wholly affective passion. We must confront its ideological underpinnings—the ideas and principles that underlie and give rise to the passion—which are propagated and reinforced by influential cultural and political elites.

Premodern Fear

Prior to the eighteenth century, most philosophers viewed fear as an artifact of our rational and moral judgments, which were the product of political phenomena like education, laws, and institutions. Aristotle, for example, believed that an individual's fear was not simply a physical reaction to physical danger, but the concluding sentence of a dialogue between his passions and beliefs. Ethical reflection helped determine the objects of a person's fear. A man who appreciated the difference between virtue and vice, for example, would realize that disgrace on the battlefield, but not poverty, was a vice, and thus, would fear the first, but not the second. Ethical reflection also informed his response to fear. Depending on his degree of virtue, a fearful person confronting death in battle would flee, stand and fight, or take simple precautionary measures. The good person was one, in that famous Aristotelian formulation, who feared “the right things, for the right motive, in the right manner, and at the right time.”⁸ Augustine believed that “the most important factor” in any emotion, including fear, was “the character of a man's will.” A good will made for a man whose “emotions

⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (New York: Macmillan, 1962) 1115a6–1115b, pp. 68–70.

will be not only blameworthy, but praiseworthy,” a bad will for a man whose “emotions will be wrong.” Genuine Christians, Augustine explained, “live by God’s standards” and as a result “feel fear and desire, pain and gladness in conformity with the holy Scriptures and sound doctrine.”⁹ For both Aristotle and Augustine, fear was intimately related to each person’s rational judgments of good and evil, virtue and vice.

In the Old Testament, fear also requires a prior acquisition of moral knowledge. In the opening pages of Genesis, what awakens Adam’s fear of being seen by God is the awareness, somewhere between pre-moral and moral, that he is naked, which he obtains only after he has eaten from the tree of knowledge.¹⁰ Throughout Deuteronomy, Moses bids the Jews, “Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God.” But fearing God, Moses discovers, is not an instinctive response to great power; it is an ethical injunction his followers must be commanded to perform, again and again—in the same way that they must be told, and reminded, not to steal, kill, or covet their neighbors’ wives. The Israelites must also be given reasons to be afraid. Moses is compelled to explain to them, “And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as it is at this day.” Like Aristotle recommending that the virtuous man forgo his fear of poverty for the sake of his fear of dishonor, Moses encourages the Jews to abandon their fear of their enemies and to fear God instead. The former fear, he intimates, suggests an inadequate appreciation of God’s stature, a failure of the moral imagination, which, gets in the way of fearing God: “Thou shalt not be afraid of them: but shalt well remember what the Lord thy god did unto Pharaoh, and unto all Egypt.”¹¹

Whether religious or secular, pre-modern thinkers argued that fear had to be deliberately cultivated and sustained by a rational understanding

⁹ Augustine, *City of God*, trans. John O’Meara (New York: Penguin, 1972) 14.6, 9, pp. 555, 561, 565.

¹⁰ *Genesis* 1–3.

¹¹ *Deuteronomy* 3:22; 6:2, 13–15, 24; 7:18–21; 10:17, 20.

of who men and women were and how they should conduct themselves as ethical beings. Developing appropriate fears also required a nexus of political institutions to reinforce these rational judgments. Hobbes, often taken as a harbinger of modernity, was in this respect decidedly pre-modern. Like Aristotle and Augustine, Hobbes believed that fear entailed a claim to knowledge, which could be assessed like all other claims to knowledge. “One man calleth *Wisdome*, what another calleth *feare*,” he observed.¹² Hobbes further claimed that it was the state’s primary responsibility to teach people to fear only those items truly worth fearing, and to act upon only those fears they were morally entitled to act upon.¹³ If the sovereign was to instill fear throughout the entire population, he would have to rely on more than a monopoly of arms. He would have to work through a combination of laws and elites, particularly preachers and teachers in churches and schools, in order to transmit a doctrine of fearful obedience. “For if men know not their duty, what is there that can force them to obey the laws? An army, you will say. But what shall force the army?”¹⁴ Political fear was not simply a top-down affair, a violent imposition from above, but a complex negotiation of passion and intellect, aided by law and moral education, at all levels of society.

Even Plato, who had so little esteem for fear that he tried to banish it from his imagined republic, believed that its exile could be wrought only by a political reorientation of belief and institution. Plato’s guardians, the protectors of the republic, had to be courageous, particularly when confronting death. But no man, Plato believed, could be courageous in the face of a danger he truly feared. “Do you believe that anyone who has this terror [of death] in him would ever become courageous?” Socrates asks Adeimantus in *The Republic*. “By Zeus, I don’t,” Adeimantus replies. “Do you suppose,” Socrates presses, “anyone who

¹² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 31.

¹³ Hobbes, 96, 127–8, 206–7.

¹⁴ Hobbes, *Behemoth or the Long Parliament*, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 59. Also see Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 232.

believes Hades' domain exists and is full of terror will be fearless in the face of death and choose death in battles above defeat and slavery?" "Not at all," says Adeimantus. So how could the guardians learn not to fear death? Through a comprehensive reeducation. "Concerning these tales" of death, Socrates says, "we must supervise those who undertake to tell them and ask them not simply to disparage Hades' domain in this way but rather to praise it, because what they say is neither true nor beneficial for men who are fighters."¹⁵ Socrates goes on to itemize all those instances of poetic excess—from Homer's account of the unhappiness of the dead to his recounting of the lamentations of Achilles and Priam over the loss of their loved ones—which must be expunged from the republic's literary imagination. For only then will they disappear from the individual's moral imagination. Fear, in other words, was a product of belief, belief a product of poets and teachers, poets and teachers a product of the republic.

The upshot of this tradition of thinking about political fear is as follows: Fear is structured by our complex judgments about good and evil. Seeking to mobilize these judgments for the sake of common action, influential elites—Hobbes's preachers and teachers, Plato's poets—teach us what to fear, and what not to fear. They focus our attention on specific items of danger, and divert us from others. So do they interpret those items for us, explaining their fearsomeness, and instructing us in the proper response to them. While it might seem that this tradition accords far too much power to teachers and preachers, what makes these figures so powerful is the combination of our own beliefs and the real threats we confront. Teachers and preachers cannot simply fabricate danger out of nothing; some threat must be present, which they can exaggerate or manipulate. And in exaggerating or manipulating these fears, they play upon our own moral or political judgments. Thus, political fear entails a collaboration between teacher and pupil, with each contributing a fair share to the final outcome.

¹⁵ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic, 1968) 386a–388a, 63–5.

9/11 and Fear in Our Midst

The aftermath of September 11 provides vivid confirmation of these observations. Though the devastation of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon are obvious, our modern-day preachers and teachers—in the government, academia, and the media—have done much to shape our perceptions of those attacks, thereby influencing and structuring the objects of our fear, and how we respond to them. These teachers and preachers have pursued three tactics: first, they have depoliticized the nature of the terrorist threat; second, they have focused on certain threats over others; finally, they have argued that the fear these depoliticized threats arouse can be the source of civic renewal. The effect of these three moves is to encourage us to view the threat of terrorism as existential and spiritual, and to suggest that the only way to meet it is through violent confrontation. The value of that confrontation is not only strategic; like the threat it is meant to counter, it is also existential. Confronting an enemy that knows nothing of politics, the argument goes, provides us with the opportunity to experience the moral certainty and political fervor that characterize liberal democracy at its best. Facing a foe that stands outside the boundaries of civilization, ignoring foes that stand within the boundaries of civilization, we know the moral value of freedom in a way we did not before. Thus, where pre-modern theorists believed that fear was an expression of our beliefs, these writers and leaders argue that fear is an occasion for discovering—or rediscovering—those beliefs.

Within weeks, even days, of the attacks, influential spokespersons announced that the terrorism that inspired 9/11 did not arise from political concerns. It was not the hijackers' hostility to U.S. power that piloted three planes into the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. Nor was it anger at America's patronage of Israel or sponsorship of despotic regimes in the Middle East. The 9/11 terrorists, many claimed, were simply not interested in politics. "Their grievance," explained Thomas Friedman, "is rooted in psychology, not politics."¹⁶ For some commentators, terrorism was fueled by an anxiety over modernity, by the march of secularism and other Western values, which threatened the Muslim world's fragile sense of identity. This anxiety had nothing

to do with power, resources, or policy. It had everything to do with cultural uneasiness. People in the grip of cultural anxiety, many claimed, are ripe for the totalizing thinking of Islamic radicalism, where Allah serves as a substitute for a lost sense of authority, the terrorist cell a replacement for a ruined social solidarity.

For other observers, the psychology of terrorism was less cultural than personal. To understand what drove Mohamed Atta, the Egyptian-born ringleader of the 9/11 attacks, analysts recommended that we look to “the raw ingredients of his personality.”¹⁷ Much was made of the fact that Atta sat on his mother’s lap until well after he had begun college. Atta’s father complained that his wife raised their only son as a girl, and frequently told young Mohamed, “Toughen up, boy.” Atta stayed away from women—right unto his death. (His will left strict instructions that none should attend his funeral.) He lived in a pink house. Though Atta’s friends claimed he was incensed by U.S. support for Egypt’s repressive government, the Gulf War, and the Oslo peace accords, the implication of these press reports was clear: Atta and his co-conspirators suffered from a troubled masculinity; 9/11 was the action of sexually ambiguous boys trying to prove that they were men.¹⁸

When other threats to the United States have emerged in the wake of 9/11—threats that either challenge these depoliticized interpretations or do not fit with preconceived notions of the dangers Americans confront—elites in government and the media have systematically ignored them. Consider, for instance, the fate of the anthrax scare in the wake of 9/11. Between October 5, 2001, when the story broke, and the end of November, five people were killed by anthrax, and eighteen others were infected. Government officials immediately hunted for signs that

¹⁶Thomas L. Friedman, “9/11 Lesson Plan,” *The New York Times* (4 September 2002):A21.

¹⁷Neil MacFarquhar, “A Portrait of the Terrorist: From Shy Child to Single-Minded Killer,” *The New York Times* (10 October 2001): B9.

¹⁸Corey Robin, “Close-Case Studies,” *The New York Times Magazine* (16 December 2001): 23–24. Also see Bruce Fudge, “The Two Faces of Islamic Studies,” *The Boston Globe* (15 December 2002): C4.

the attack originated in the Middle East, particularly Iraq. As a top government scientist associated with the investigation later revealed, “I know there are a number of people” in the Bush Administration “who would love an excuse to get after Iraq.” As a result, according to a high-level intelligence official, the U.S. government “looked for any shred of evidence that would bear on this [the Iraq connection], or any foreign source.” But, he added, “it’s just not there.”¹⁹ So long as anthrax had a whiff of the Middle East about it, officials aggressively pursued the threat, and the media lavished attention upon it. In October, following the outbreak, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* together ran 1,192 stories mentioning anthrax, and in November, 886 stories. In December, however, that number plummeted to 400; by February, anthrax tallied a mere 140 mentions.²⁰ What happened? Partially, the outbreak subsided, with the last case of infection reported in late November. Partially, the investigation stalled, with few leads turning up, though not as few as the government would later claim. Also important, though, was the government’s growing acknowledgment throughout November and December that the perpetrator of the attack was probably an American citizen, with likely connections to the US military.²¹ At that point, the government simply lost interest in the story—perhaps because the idea of anthrax’s domestic origins did not fit with the Bush Administration’s foreign policy goals, or because domestic terrorism did not register as a threat to officials viewing danger solely through the lens of the Middle East.

So did the media lose interest, partially because the story no longer seemed salient, but also, one suspects, because it lacked the Middle East connection that initially made it newsworthy. Whatever the

¹⁹ William J. Broad and David Johnston, “U.S. Inquiry Tried, but Failed, to Link Iraq to Anthrax Attack,” *The New York Times* (22 December 2001): A1.

²⁰ Lexis-Nexis search.

²¹ Bob Woodward, “FBI and CIA Suspect Domestic Extremists,” *The Washington Post* (27 October 2001): A1; William J. Broad, “Terror Anthrax Resembles Type Made by U.S.,” *The New York Times* (3 December 2001): A1; William J. Broad, “F.B.I. Queries Expert Who Sees Federal Lab Tie in Anthrax Cases,” *The New York Times* (14 December 2001): B6.

reason, when *The New York Times* ran a piece the following July headlined “Anthrax? The F.B.I. Yawns,” everyone else yawned too.²² Even though the perpetrator of the attack had still not been found and the damage to various government offices still not repaired, even though the article accused the F.B.I. of refusing to put a leading suspect in the biochemical industry under surveillance or to compare his handwriting with that of the anthrax letters, hardly a single newspaper or television network picked up the story. No one in these circles seemed to care, and anthrax disappeared from the public agenda.

Or consider how the government and media have inflated the danger of dissenting individuals accused of supporting terrorism while minimizing that of corporations accused of similar crimes. On February 20, 2003, the Justice Department filed charges against Sami Al-Arian, a Kuwaiti-born Palestinian professor of engineering at the University of South Florida, accusing him of financing and supporting Islamic Jihad, a terrorist organization linked to more than 100 killings in Israel and the Occupied Territories. Hoping to seize upon the indictment as a showcase for the 2001 Patriot Act, the Justice Department announced Al-Arian’s arrest to much fanfare, and found a receptive audience in the American media. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* both ran front-page stories about the indictment, and in the week following, 318 articles appeared in other outlets.²³ By contrast, when the federal government revealed two months later that it had fined 57 companies and organizations for doing business with rogue states and terrorist groups, hardly anyone in the government or the media raised an eyebrow—even though the companies included Chevron-Texaco, Walmart, Citigroup, the New York Yankees, and Amazon.com; even though their partners ranged from Iraq to Iran to an undisclosed terrorist organization. The government levied minimal fines, totaling a mere 1.35 million dollars, and posted notice of these corporate crimes

²² Nicholas D. Kristof, “Anthrax? The F.B.I. Yawns,” *The New York Times* (2 July 2002): A21.

²³ Lexis-Nexis search. Also see Eric Lichtblau and Judith Miller, “Indictment Ties U.S. Professor to Terror Group,” *The New York Times* (21 February 2003): A1.

on a lonely Treasury Department web site—and that only after a watchdog group filed a lawsuit to force the records public. The government disclosure only cited the offending corporations, their trading partners, and the fines, and then made an oblique reference to the sections of the Trading With the Enemy Act the companies had violated (for example, “E013121 FT”). Not a single major U.S. newspaper or television network picked up the story; it only appeared in twelve media outlets, several of them in foreign countries.²⁴ In neither case did the alleged crimes involve anyone participating in or plotting actual violence—Al-Arian and the 57 corporations were only accused of involvement with or support of terrorist groups or rogue states, and in Al-Arian’s case, the terrorist threat was to Israeli rather than American citizens—but only in the first case did it serve government interests to make so much of the danger threatened and now averted.

The combined effect of these two tacks—on the one hand, depoliticized interpretations of Islamic radicalism, and, on the other, a studied disregard for domestic terrorists and the contributions of U.S. companies to terrorism—is to deprive the terrorists of any political standing, to demonstrate that their grievances belong to some otherworldly concern, which can neither be addressed nor accommodated through non-military means. Thus construed, terrorism cannot be contained, only crushed, thereby providing a useful justification for the wholly military response the United States has pursued.

Whatever the strategic utility of that military response, it seems to be attractive to many leading figures because it furnishes an opportunity for domestic renewal. Before 9/11, many commentators have argued, we were in a dystopian Eden, idling in a warm bath of social autism. According to journalist David Brooks, the ethos of the day was to cultivate our “private paradises,” to bask, in the words of novelist Don DeLillo, in “the utopian glow of cyber-capital.” At the time bliss seemed

²⁴ Lexis-Nexis search. Also see Rex Hutting, “US Companies Quietly Caught Trading With the Enemy,” CBS MarketWatch (15 April 2003): <http://www.cbs.market-watch.com>.

the glorious flower of peace and prosperity. In fact, many claim, it was the rotting fruit of decadence and decay. Suffering no difficulties, feeling no loss, we let our sense of the world go dim, our muscles atrophy. Holding up a mirror to our impoverished appetite for experience, Brooks notes that the most celebrated sitcom of the age was *Seinfeld*, “a show about nothing.” But 9/11, writes columnist Frank Rich, was a “nightmare,” awakening us from a “frivolous if not decadent decade-long dream.” The fear it provoked, adds Brooks, was a morning “cleanser, washing away a lot of the self-indulgence” of the nineties. According to journalist George Packer, it brought us “alertness, grief, resolve, even love”—experience itself. Packer cites, approvingly, the comments of an investment banker fleeing the World Trade Center on the day of the attack: “I’m not in shock. I like this state. I’ve never been more cognizant in my life.” Fear restored to us the clarifying knowledge that evil exists, making moral, deliberate action possible once again. What was to be dreaded was not a repeat of 9/11 but, according to Packer, a “return to the normality” that preceded it, for that would mean “instead of public memorials, private consumption; instead of lines to give blood, restaurant lines,” instead of civic attention, personal dissolution.²⁵

Once the war on terrorism began, writers repeatedly welcomed the galvanizing moral electricity allegedly coursing through the body politic. A pulsing energy of public resolve and civic commitment, restoring trust in government—perhaps, according to some liberals, authorizing a revamped welfare state—a culture of patriotism and connection, a new bipartisan consensus, the end of irony and the culture wars, a more mature, more elevated presidency. According to a reporter at *USA Today*, President Bush was especially keen on the spiritual promise of the war on terrorism, offering himself and his generation as exhibit A

²⁵ David Brooks, “The Age of Conflict,” *The Weekly Standard* (5 November 2001): 19ff; Don DeLillo, “In the Ruins of the Future,” *Harper’s* (December 2001) 33; Frank Rich, “The Day Before Tuesday,” *The New York Times* (15 September 2001): A23; David Brooks, “Facing Up to Our Fears,” *Newsweek* (22 October 2001): 66; George Packer, “Recapturing the Flag,” *The New York Times Magazine* (30 September 2001): 15–16.

in the project of domestic renewal: “Bush has told advisors that he believes confronting the enemy is a chance for him and his fellow baby boomers to refocus their lives and prove they have the same kind of valor and commitment their fathers showed in WWII.”²⁶ And while the specific source of Christopher Hitchens’ elation may have been peculiarly his own, his self-declared *schadenfreude* at the prospect of war assuredly was not:

I should perhaps confess that on September 11 last, once I had experienced all the usual mammalian gamut of emotions, from rage to nausea, I also discovered that another sensation was contending for mastery. On examination, and to my own surprise and pleasure, it turned out to be exhilaration. Here was the most frightful enemy—theocratic barbarism—in plain view... I realized that if the battle went on until the last day of my life, I would never get bored in prosecuting it to the utmost.²⁷

With its shocking spectacle of death and galvanizing fear, 9/11 offered a dead or dying culture the chance to live again.

²⁶ Judy Keen, “Same President, Different Man in Oval Office,” *USA Today* (29 October 2001): 6A.

²⁷ Christopher Hitchens, “Images in a Rearview Mirror,” *The Nation* (3 December 2001): 9. Lest he be misunderstood, Hitchens insists that his enthusiasm is not for a war of the purely moral or political—that is, metaphorical—variety. He praises the U.S. war in Afghanistan, particularly the American military’s use there of cluster bombs, which explode in a shower of lethal bomblets: “Those steel pellets will go straight through somebody and out the other side and through somebody else. And if they’re bearing a Koran over their heart, it’ll go straight through that, too. So they won’t be able to say, ‘Ah, I was bearing a Koran over my heart and guess what, the missile stopped halfway through.’ No way, ‘cause it’ll go straight through that as well.” Cited in Adam Shatz, “The Left and 9/11,” *The Nation* (23 September 2002): 26ff. And lest his December 3, 2001 statement be misconstrued as over-heated enthusiasm in response to the war’s initial victories, Hitchens chose to repeat it, almost verbatim, just three days shy of the one-year anniversary of September 11. See Christopher Hitchens, “It’s A Good Time For War,” *The Boston Globe* (8 September 2002): 15.

Fear and the Cold War

It is tempting to dismiss these statements as the peculiar outburst of a peculiar generation, fed up with the pleasures of prosperity, eager to match, if not excel, the heroism of its fathers. Yet, at the dawn of the Cold War, we find a similar set of arguments—about both the nature of the communist enemy and the opportunity for moral clarity and political renewal offered by the struggle against that enemy. Perhaps it was in anticipation that communism would one day give way to Islam as the object of American fears that the Alsop brothers, Stewart and Joseph, wrote at the height of the Cold War that every communist was “as much a fanatic participant in a holy war as every whirling dervish.”²⁸ In 1949, Arthur Schlesinger published *The Vital Center*, an analysis of the threat of communism, international and domestic, and a scathing diagnosis of the American psyche. Foreshadowing claims that Thomas Friedman, Bernard Lewis, and others routinely make, Schlesinger situated the challenge of communism against a backdrop of cultural anxiety and despair. A “modern industrial economy” like our own, he argued, “based on impersonality, interchangeability and speed” had shredded the “protective tissues of medievalism” throughout the Western world. For those bewildered by these changes communism promised “the security and comradeship of a crusading unity, propelled by a deep and driving faith.” It “fill[ed] empty lives.” That—and not “the economics of *Das Kapital*” or any other political grievance—was the overriding reason for communism’s appeal.²⁹

Like contemporary writers who see Al Qaeda as a symptom of psychosexual frustrations, Schlesinger also dipped into the wells of psychoanalysis for insight into the communist phenomenon. The United States, he argued, with “its quota of lonely and frustrated people, craving social, intellectual and even sexual fulfillment they cannot obtain in

²⁸ Cited in Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Basic, 1998) 145.

²⁹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (1949; New York: DaCapo, 1988) 51, 54, 105.

existing society,” provided a psychic seedbed for communism. “For these people, party discipline is no obstacle; it is an attraction. The great majority of members in America, as in Europe, *want* to be disciplined.”³⁰ Other analysts dug in the dirt of radical lives, searching for juicy bits of gender trouble to explain the psychic origins of leftist politics. Joe McCarthy called Dean Acheson—no Communist, but a confirmed Democrat—“the Red Dean of Fashion.” A psychological profile read by J. Edgar Hoover and President Eisenhower made much of the fact that “in Communist marriages the wife is the more dominant partner,” and that American Communist spy Julius Rosenberg was “the slave and his wife, Ethel, the master.”³¹ The 1952 film *My Son John* depicted the American family’s oedipal triangle as a doorway of communist infiltration. It featured Robert Walker, a young dissident in the making, cozying up to his overly affectionate mother and scoffing at his distant and abusive father. After camping his way through adolescence, Walker heads off to college, where he finds manly reprieve in the Communist Party—not unlike Mohamed Atta in Al Qaeda. When his mother finally confronts her son about his tendencies, she suggests that if only he had played football like his brothers, her two “fighting half-backs” in Korea, he might have been spared this political perversion.³²

Like many analysts of the contemporary war on terrorism, Schlesinger also saw the possibility for civic renewal in the war on communism. In fact, that was one of its chief benefits. Even though the Soviet Union was just about to explode the atom bomb, and the United States was on the verge of the Korean War, Schlesinger was adamant that the greatest threat to the United States was not external but internal, not political but spiritual. “The crisis of free society has assumed the form of international collision between democracies and totalitarian powers; but this fact should not blind us to the fact that in its essence this crisis is internal.” Like those men and women who joined the Communist

³⁰ Schlesinger 104.

³¹ Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 147–8.

³² Nora Sayre, *Running Time: Films of the Cold War* (New York: Dial, 1982) 94–8.

Party in order to relieve their anxiety, Americans suffered from the loss of pre-modern traditions and faith. The solution? Turn the conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States into a proving ground of self and society. By confronting an external enemy, Americans could transform their existential anxiety into focused, galvanizing fear. Anticipating the claims of our contemporary pundits, Schlesinger urged readers to “strike at the dilemma of history,” by which he meant the anxieties of meaninglessness and despair, “in terms of the problem” between the United States and the Soviet Union. “The fact that the contest between the USA and the USSR is not the source of the contemporary crisis does not,” he insisted, “alter the fact that the crisis must be met in terms of this contest.”³³

Though I have focused here on the role of teachers and preachers in interpreting and amplifying the objects of public fear, government laws and policies also influence people’s fears. During the Cold War, for instance, the F.B.I. and the Justice Department used the Smith Act to prosecute the top leadership of the Communist Party in court—not for espionage, treason, or the violent overthrow of the government, but for conspiring to organize a party to teach and advocate the violent overthrow of the government. The sheer number of nouns and verbs the law and indictment required to link the defendants to actual crime—“conspiracy,” “organize,” “party,” “teach,” “advocate”—suggests just how far removed the Communist Party leadership was in this case from anything resembling criminal activity.³⁴ It didn’t matter, for the purpose of the trial, one of Hoover’s deputies explained, was not prosecution but pedagogy, or pedagogy through prosecution. Prosecuting the Communist leadership would teach Americans “that Communism is dangerous,” he claimed, that the “patriotism of Communists is not

³³ Schlesinger 6–7, 244.

³⁴ *The Smith Act and Dennis et al v. United States*, in *Political and Civil Rights in the United States*, vol. I, ed. Thomas I. Emerson, David Haber, and Norman Dorsen (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967) 98–120.

³⁵ Cited in Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford, 2002) 49.

directed towards the United States but towards the Soviet Union.”³⁵ The effect of these and other government policies on popular fears was palpable, with the public drifting from its World War II tolerance of the Communist Party to an unprecedented level of apprehension. While the federal government certainly did not create such fears—anti-communism was already a powerful American ideology, to which the Soviet Union and the Communist Party did much in the postwar years to contribute—it used a string of laws and prosecutions to mold and direct the opinions that created so much fear.³⁶

Conclusion

While it is too early to assess the effects of the war on terrorism on contemporary fears, preliminary evidence suggests that it has had an effect, heightening people’s fear of Muslims and Arab citizens and immigrants, rather than diminishing it. Though 9/11 itself played a tremendous role in generating that fear, several researchers have shown that the Patriot Act and the post-9/11 roundup of two to five thousand Muslim and Arab men have exacerbated it. Demonstrating what social psychologists call the “just-world effect,” many Americans have rationalized these measures, concluding that the individuals negatively affected by them must have done something to deserve the treatment they have received. The upshot, according to researchers, has been to increase popular fears beyond whatever level Americans may have felt in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.³⁷ That is how policies designed to promote security can work. As much as they are inspired by fear, so do they create it, inculcating a sense in the wider population that those being targeted must have somehow earned this unwanted government attention. “Say what you like,” Soviet dissident Nadezdha Mandelstam

³⁶ Athan Theoharis, “The Rhetoric of Politics: Foreign Policy, Internal Security, and Domestic Politics in the Truman Era, 1945-50,” *Politics and Policies of the Truman Administration*, ed. Barton J. Bernstein (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1970) 196–241; Richard M. Fried, *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 59–60.

³⁷ Solana Pyne, “Making Enemies,” *Village Voice* (15 July 2003): 48.

reports a woman commenting to her about a group of citizens imprisoned under Stalin, “there’s no smoke without fire.”³⁸

Though post-9/11 America is obviously a world apart from Stalinist Russia—though not as far from McCarthyite America as we might believe—these cases suggest that reason and its political artifacts, particularly education and laws, play a considerable role in generating political fear. The problem of political fear, then, cannot be alleviated by a mere addition of reason. It requires instead a greater attention to the reason we already have and use, a greater skepticism toward the knowledge claims our fear already presumes. But if the record of Cold War reason is any guide, we have little ground for optimism that such skepticism is in the offing.

³⁸ Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope*, trans. Max Hayward (1970; New York: Modern Library, 1999) 33.