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PART IV

Interdisciplinary Analyses of Personal Security
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“FEAR APPEALS” AND SECURITY IN AMERICAN FOREIGN RELATIONS

Christopher J. Fettweis

Fear, more than any other single factor, compelled the United States to attack Iraq. The war’s supporters both within and outside of the Bush administration were afraid that Saddam Hussein would eventually share his dreaded mega-weapons with terrorists, and that the window of opportunity to prevent that nightmare was rapidly closing. Images of U.S. cities disappearing under mushroom clouds haunted decision makers and encouraged action, even if they knew the probability of such events was low. If there was even a 1 percent chance of catastrophe, Vice President Dick Cheney notoriously argued, prudence demanded that Washington treat it as if it were certain (Suskind 2006). “We will not live in fear,” President Bush assured a Cincinnati audience in October 2002 (Jervis 2003, 371). In this case, as in so many others, that meant war.

As it turned out, the Hussein regime was even more deluded, inept and harmless than anyone had imagined before the invasion (Duelfer and Dyson 2011). Fears of poisoned subways and unstoppable plagues were entirely unjustified, and the war was an unnecessary, tragic blunder, one from which the United States will not soon recover, strategically or morally. It was just the latest in a long string of U.S. foreign policy disasters motivated in large part by an unwarranted belief that the world is a fundamentally dangerous place.

More than one observer has noted that the United States routinely perceives its threats to be far more dire and immediate than do other countries (Kennan 1977; Chace and Carr 1988; J. Thompson 1992; Allin 1994; Johnson 1994). Whether the issue is Islamic fundamentalist terrorism, failing states or rogue actors, the United States detects higher levels of danger than any other state. During the Cold War, the pattern was the same: the United States feared an attack by the Warsaw Pact far more than did its West European allies, who presumably had more to lose if such an event occurred; it worried about the influence of communist China more than South Korea, Japan and Indonesia did; and it obsessed over the potential pernicious influence of Castro and the Sandinistas far more than did its smaller friends in the region, like Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, Panama or Venezuela (Nordlinger 1995, 269–270). In 2002 the other members of the “Coalition of the Willing” had a much harder time selling the invasion of Iraq to their publics than did Washington (Gordon and Shapiro 2004). “After the Cold War, and even after 9/11, Europeans felt relatively secure,” Robert Kagan observed (2008, 31). “Only the Americans were frightened.” Despite the fact that the other states in the system are all demonstrably weaker than the United States and are therefore presumably more vulnerable to a variety of threats, none seems to worry about its safety nearly as much as does Uncle Sam. As a result, the United States blunders into unnecessary conflicts at a much greater pace.
Where does this belief in the inherent dangers of the outside world come from? Is it primarily the product of cynical manipulation by elites seeking to profit from national fear? This chapter examines this phenomenon, or what will be referred to as geopolitical fear, and its pathological effects on U.S. foreign policy. It also examines one possible explanation for it in some depth: the influence of what the editors of this volume refer to as “fear appeals” by the government and media. Although such appeals certainly contribute to the presence of underlying national fear in the United States, they cannot take full credit for its existence. Geopolitical fear cannot be merely dismissed as the product of cynical manipulation of public opinion by ambitious politicians and media figures. Such manipulation exists, but it would not succeed without an audience, a base in American society receptive to delusions of danger. To believe that the common perception of threat that exists in the United States can be attributed to any single source misunderstands the nature of beliefs and their effect on foreign policy.1 Supporters of the war in Iraq were entirely sincere about the dangers posed by Hussein; their beliefs, however, proved to be catastrophically pathological.2

Fear in U.S. Society and Foreign Policy

The people of the United States seem to pride themselves on their courage, especially in the face of the unremitting evil that threatens them around every corner. They would not necessarily agree with the proposition that their country lives in fear, or that it worries more than others about the future. While they may not actively spend their days in fear, however, there is no doubt that the American people harbor what might be thought of as geopolitical fear—the belief that the world is a dangerous place, full of evil actors seeking to do them harm. This fear, which is perhaps better thought of as a generalized anxiety about the nature of the outside world, is borne out in poll after poll and is visible across the political spectrum.

Fear need not affect all aspects of life to be important to some. People may be perfectly rational about their own personal safety, for instance, but harbor unreasonable fear for their country. In other words, perceptions of individual and collective safety might not be consistent. In fact, anxiety is probably more common in groups than it is for individuals. People “go mad in herds,” wrote Charles Mackay in 1852 (1932, p. 20), “while they only recover their senses slowly, and one by one.” One consistent finding of post-9/11 polling is that people seem to be more worried about terrorist attacks in general than in their own communities—in other words, personal threat is not as great as national threat (Huddy et al. 2002). As these data suggest, people need not be worried for themselves to be so for their country, or for their way of life, once they have become part of the group. It is this group anxiety, regarding threats not to their person but to their society and ideals, that characterizes the geopolitical fear of Americans.

Americans have always viewed the Old World with some skepticism and have remained convinced, especially since World War II, that they were living in dangerous times. Though the source of that danger has evolved over the years, from communist spies to Soviet missiles to Japa-
more dangerous than it was during the Cold War. Indeed, polls throughout the seemingly safe 1990s revealed high levels of anxiety in the American people on a wide variety of issues (Furedi 1997, 61).

Terrorism tops the list today, as might be expected. Although the public is not quite as concerned as it was in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, between a quarter to a third of Americans consistently report being “very” or “somewhat” worried that they or their families will be victims of terrorist violence (Gardner 2008, 248–250; Bloch-Elkon 2011). In April 2007, 82 percent of Americans told pollsters that the world was a more dangerous place than it used to be, and that it was getting worse. One year later, the same poll found that a “significant majority” of Americans were anxious about U.S. security, demonstrating that in the United States, “anxiety remains steady over time.” Only 15 percent reported being not worried about “the way things are going for the United States in world affairs” (Bittle and Rochkind 2007, 2008). September 11 merely put a face on the danger many already knew existed. When it came to fear, at least, Robert Kagan was correct when he noted that “America did not change on September 11” but “only became more itself” (2003, 85).

Anxious actors take steps to protect themselves. A good secondary measure of the degree of insecurity a state feels is therefore the size of its military. While almost the entire industrialized world has cut back on defense spending since the Cold War, the United States has been an outlier, spending more today in real terms than ever before, and 70 percent more in 2010 than in 2000 (not including war supplements) (Wirls 2010, 1). No military-industrial complex can take full credit for the strong, consistent support for an enormous military. It is the belief about the dangers inherent in the world that keeps the public so concerned about the strength of its defense and so supportive of the warriors manning its figurative protective walls.

While a full evaluation of the justification for this elevated level of geopolitical fear is outside the scope of this essay—it is available elsewhere (Fettweis 2013)—a few observations are in order before leaving the topic. Overall, it is hard to imagine a belief more at odds with reality. Indeed, one can make a good case that by any reasonable measure the United States is the safest country in the history of the world. Ongoing conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, the Congo and elsewhere tend to obscure what is certainly the most important empirical reality in twenty-first-century international politics: there has never been a more peaceful, less violent period of time than the post–Cold War era. Not only is major war between strong states all but obsolete, but the number and magnitude of minor wars—as well as ethnic conflicts, civil wars, violence against civilians, coups, discrimination against minority groups, the risk of dying in battle, global military spending and many other indicators of conflict—are at historic lows, and conquest of states by neighbors simply no longer occurs. By any reasonable measure, we are living in a golden age of peace and security. Today’s national security threats—terrorists, immigrants, far-away rogue states—make the world appear dangerous only to those with no historical perspective. Rather than enjoying this unprecedented period of relative safety, however, the United States has found new things to fear.

The main goal of this chapter is not to evaluate American geopolitical fear but to explain it; to understand rather than criticize. Where does this heightened level of geopolitical fear come from? A number of potential explanations exist, drawn from factors of individual psychology, those unique to the American experience and structural features of the international system. As is often the case in international political psychology, these variables are not independent of one another, nor are they neatly measurable (Stein 1988). Unfortunately for those who like their explanations parsimonious, they are instead interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Recognition of the various compounding factors can lead to the minimization of their effects and, over time, perhaps even a decrease in the pathological pressures of fear.
Fear Appeals

People are not born thinking that the world contains myriad dangers. Like most deeply held beliefs, this sense develops slowly, reinforced by families and society over time. Although all societies have what might be considered fear entrepreneurs who disproportionately shape the perceptions of the masses, the United States contains more than its share. A number are worthy of further discussion.

Fear, Politics and Governance

In his memoirs, Douglas MacArthur observed that throughout his lifetime, “our government kept us in a perpetual state of fear,” in a “continual stampede of patriotic fervor—with a cry of a grave national emergency. Always there has been some terrible evil at home or some monstrous foreign power that was going to gobble us up” (quoted in Barash 1994, 21). Leaders of democratic societies cannot help but notice that their poll numbers rise when the populace is afraid; indeed, it would be surprising if they did not attempt to take advantage of this on occasion. Fearful people seek protection and “rally ‘round the flag” (Mueller 1970). This is hardly a new phenomenon: H.L. Mencken observed that, before the U.S. entry into World War I, Woodrow Wilson and other liberals realized that “the only way to make the mob fight was to scare it half to death” (1958, 114). More recently, the U.S. public showed little enthusiasm for the first Gulf War until President George H.W. Bush began injecting the threat of Iraqi nuclear weapons into his justification speeches (Mueller 1994). The next Bush administration built support for its war against Saddam Hussein by warning that the alternative was likely to be nuclear terrorist attacks on the United States, smoking guns in the form of mushroom clouds. When faced with such choices, the American people understandably go along with war. Manipulation of popular perceptions by leaders, therefore, surely contribute to the national pathology.

At least since 9/11, the political establishment of the United States has been united by the seriousness of the terrorist threat and completely misleading about the risks (Gardner 2008, 269). While he was secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld wrote a series of internal memos instructing his subordinates to remind the public of how much danger they were in, to “keep elevating the threat,” and to “talk about Somalia, the Philippines, etc. Make the American people realize they are surrounded in the world by violent extremists” (quoted in Wright 2007). The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has been a particularly egregious institutional offender. Rather than conceiving of its role as a voice of reason in the fight against terror, the department has often sought to increase national anxiety in the name of battling complacency. Over the course of its nine-year life span, the DHS’s color-coded terrorism alert system was raised to “high” a number of times (including for three straight weeks in February 2003, the month before the invasion of Iraq), despite the fact that the average person could do nothing in response. Rather than provide statistics about the true risk of the terrorist threat, DHS leaders have preferred to report “gut feelings” about impending attacks and advise the public to stockpile duct tape and plastic sheeting (Chicago Tribune 2007). Homeland Security courses and departments have popped up around the country, all with public funding, spreading the fear gospel under the guise of scholarship. Without fear, after all, support for the department would collapse. Overall, Osama had no better ally in his attempt to frighten the American people. “There is America, full of fear from north to south, from west to east,” he said in one of his occasional rambling videos, “and Thank God for that” (quoted in Nacos 2007, 50). He also could have thanked DHS.

There are other important actors within the U.S. government whose institutional interests prevent recognition that the United States exists in a low–threat environment. The budget and overall raison d’être of the military, for instance, would be called into question in a safe world.
The intelligence services issue regular assessments of the security environment that conveniently fail to mention the proliferation of peace. As a result, its members dismiss the evidence. Fear has a number of institutional constituencies beyond DHS, in other words, who are professionally inclined to detect danger, whether or not it exists. “It is difficult to get a man to understand something,” Upton Sinclair famously noted, “when his salary depends upon his not understanding it” (1935, 109).

Fear is not generated merely for the sake of bolstering the popularity of whatever administration is doing the generating. For U.S. policy makers, part of the inspiration to consistently inflate dangers is the imperative to beat back the isolationist bogeyman so many assume lurks in the American public and in Congress. The real “present danger,” according to Robert Kagan and William Kristol, “is that the United States, the world’s dominant power on whom the maintenance of international peace and the support of liberal democratic principles depends, will shirk its responsibilities and—in a fit of absentmindedness, or parsimony, or indifference—allow the international order that it created and sustains to collapse” (2000, 4). Without constant reminders of the dangers lurking in the system, the United States could return to a “September 10th mentality.” To many in the U.S. national security establishment, the greatest weapon against the prime domestic enemy—that desire on the part of the American people to mind their own business—is fear.

The peculiarities of American electoral politics provide few incentives for rational security discourse. In 1960 Senator John Kennedy rode fears of a “missile gap,” which he knew was fictional, into the White House. Since then, it has been Republicans who have more frequently suggested that electing their opponents would leave the country vulnerable to a variety of bears in the woods. Democrats have responded by attempting to sound tough on security matters, which usually implies the exaggeration of threats where necessary (Zenko and Cohen 2012). This volume begins by reminding us that in 1933 it was in Franklin Roosevelt’s political interest to calm Americans by asserting that the greatest danger was “fear itself”; in 2004 it was in George W. Bush’s to do the opposite (Gardner 2008, 266). In 2006 Vice President Cheney campaigned on behalf of Republican congressional candidates by repeatedly warning of the “mass death” that would occur if the Democrats took over (Baker 2006). One study found that in the United States, unlike in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, voters respond quite directly and positively to the politics of fear. In American politics, fear wins debates and votes, while appeals to reason can seem to indicate a lack of seriousness regarding the threat du jour. There is evidently little political downside to frightening people and keeping them good and scared.

Across the world, right-wing political parties always sense more danger than their competitors, and those of the United States are no exception. First and foremost, neoconservatives and their ideological predecessors have been consistent in their belief that the world is a very dangerous place, seeing themselves as modern Paul Reveres warning their naïve countrymen of the dangers closing in on the American public from a variety of angles. A heightened threat perception is part of the definition of neoconservatism for many observers and separates the ideology from more traditional conservatism. “Particulars might change,” argued a prominent critic, “but for neoconservatives crisis is a permanent condition. The situation is always urgent, the alternatives stark, the need for action compelling, the implications of delay or inaction certain to be severe” (Bacevich 2005, 77). The people of the United States need to be constantly reminded of the threats they face, the thinking goes, since they tend to assume the best in people and drift toward complacency. What critics see as fear mongering, therefore, is to neoconservatives an honest description of a dangerous world. Thus, Secretary of Defense James Forrestal, an intellectual forerunner of today’s neoconservatives, was completely sincere in 1947 when he observed that “there is no method, there is no way except the methods of worry, of constant concern, and of unceasing energy that will give us our security” (quoted in N. Thompson 2009, 87).
Not only does danger exist, but security conditions are constantly deteriorating, and as a result today is always more dangerous than yesterday. Even in 1947, according to proto-neocon James Burnham, the world political situation was “immeasurably worse” than it had been a decade prior (1947, 159). Though the Cold War threat was apparently much more dire than that posed by the Axis, the collapse of the Soviet Union did not reduce the danger. “Islamofascists,” according to Norman Podhoretz (2007, 13), “are even more dangerous and difficult to beat than their totalitarian predecessors of World War II and World War III.” Donald and Frederick Kagan have even argued that the Soviet Union had in fact become a “force for stability,” which was quite the opposite of what they and other neoconservatives were saying while it existed (2000, 269). The notion that the Cold War was a time of relative stability when the United States faced a predictable foe is now commonplace in neoconservative writing, usually offered without a hint of irony, as if these were not the very people who had spent a generation crafting the case that the Soviets were an evil, irrational and fundamentally unpredictable foe.

To the extent that neoconservatism affects national anxiety levels, therefore, it does so in a uniform direction. Its members manned the parapets during the Cold War, warning against relaxation and/or accommodation, and after the fall of the Berlin Wall argued that Americans could not let their guard down without rogue states, terrorists and generalized chaos taking advantage. Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich may be the most prominent offender, stating in a debate in 2012, for example, that “all of us are more at risk today—men and women, boys and girls—than at any time in the history of this country,” but he is hardly alone. Indeed, one need look no further than the titles of some of the major recent neoconservative works—Present Dangers, World War IV, The War against the Terror Masters, An End to Evil, Why We Fight, Surrender Is Not an Option and so forth—to come away with the impression that the world is a very dangerous place where freedom is under continual assault. What may appear to others to be rather minor challenges are often elevated by neocons to threats of the first order. This occurred throughout 2002 and early 2003, when many in the movement led the way in arguing that Iraq was not a greatly degraded regional power but “a threat like no other,” about which “we have every reason to assume the worst” (Kaplan and Kristol 2003, 73).

None of this is to imply that leaders are always, or even usually, insincere when they issue warnings about the present dangers. People are quite capable of aligning their political interests with their beliefs about security and danger. “Humans are compulsive rationalizers,” wrote the journalist Daniel Gardner in his review of the psychology literature on this issue (2008, 139). “Self-interest and sincere belief seldom part company.” Rumsfeld believed that people needed to be reminded of threats; Chertoff’s gut actually told him to expect attacks; Cheney “believed in his bones that the risks were mortal and real,” according to the most authoritative work on his motivations (Gellman 2008, 227). For these purposes, it is important to note that even initially disingenuous motivations quickly become the truth, as a result of every human being’s desire to be internally consistent. No matter what President Bush’s initial calculations were regarding Iraq, for example, there is little doubt today that he truly believed (and continues to, despite all evidence to the contrary) that Saddam represented a clear and present danger and that removing him was the right thing to do. To hold otherwise would be cognitively unacceptable for almost anyone in his position. When necessary, the mind creates beliefs where none existed before.

In the final analysis, the sincerity of scaremongering political leaders does not much matter. After all, as eminent diplomat George Kennan wrote, “history does not forgive us our national mistakes because they are explicable in terms of domestic politics” (1951, 65). Stoking pathological fires not only has effects for the short term by gathering support for otherwise unnecessary action but tends to do long-term damage as well. Once lit, such fires are very hard to extinguish. Fear and anxiety persist long after they are useful and continue to drive decisions, becoming at times beyond the power of more responsible leaders to control.
“Fear Appeals” in Foreign Relations

Fear and the Media

The United States is served—or held hostage—by a twenty-four-hour news cycle that thrives on conflict and danger. Fear is an essential component of the business models of CNN, MSNBC and Fox, a necessary tool to keep fingers away from remote controls during commercial breaks. Voices of reason tend to spoil the fun and may inspire people to seek excitement elsewhere. News outlets win by being more frightening, angrier and simpler than their competitors, not by supplying historical perspective, statistics or reassurance. More than ever before, the media operates according to a “logic of entertainment” at least as much as one of information and analysis (Altheide 2002, 177). If no danger exists, it must be created, or at least creatively implied.

The imperatives of that logic are amplified even further now that media messages are beyond the control of professionals. The sensationalist instincts of the “mainstream media” are miniscule compared to those of the Internet-based “new media,” where fairness and accuracy often appear to be afterthoughts rather than goals. Many beliefs that are pervasive in the United States, such as those of the “truthers” who think the United States was behind the 9/11 attacks or the “birthers” who doubt the birthplace of Barack Obama, were never championed by mainstream media outlets. The very thing that makes the new media so attractive to so many—the absence of the gate-keeping mechanisms of professional journalism—also render them susceptible to unchecked misinformation, much of which can affect the formation of beliefs (Lewandowsky et al. 2012).

That logic leads it to stoke fear, often unintentionally, by offering compelling entertainment in the competition for ratings. The effect is not always so accidental, however; indeed, some media figures have built careers on creating the impression that the United States is constantly on the verge of catastrophe. The country is in a death spiral, they warn, and the only thing that can possibly save it is their advice. Radio and television host Glenn Beck, who regularly trembles with passion and fear, is perhaps the most obvious example. It is too bad that Richard Hofstadter did not live long enough to hear Beck’s show, since it would have given him more evidence for his justly famous essay on the paranoid style in American politics. “The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of conspiracy in apocalyptic terms,” Hofstadter wrote (1964, 82). “He traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values. He is always manning the barricades of civilization. He constantly lives at a turning point.” Beck inhabits such a point, or so he believes, and he passes on that belief to his audience on a daily basis. Millions listen to his daily review of the evidence for the coming revolution, one purportedly concocted by a nefarious secret alliance of socialists, anti-Zionists, George Soros, service employee unions, Islamists, the “liberal media” and members of the Obama administration. The conspiracy reaches all the way to the top, where at the head of the Central Intelligence Agency sits an “operative” of the Muslim Brotherhood. However, one could just as easily point out that President Obama chose to hold his first official rally of the 2012 campaign on May 5, which happens to be Karl Marx’s birthday. Beck might be alone in detecting secret communist plots to undermine our freedoms (can it be a coincidence, for example, that President Obama chose to hold his first official rally of the 2012 campaign on May 5, which happens to be Karl Marx’s birthday?), but he shares visions of UN schemes to force internationalist values upon the United States with many on the right, including prominent political commentators (Morris and McGann 2012). He repeatedly tells his listeners that he does not know when the revolution will occur—Beck admits he is not good at “timing”—but that it is indeed coming and everyone needs to prepare. And pray, of course. Beck’s audience, like that of Fox News in general, not only has its anxieties regularly confirmed and intensified but finds out about entirely new threats to its security with which it was previously unfamiliar.

The sagacious analyst should not dismiss Beck as merely an opportunistic showman who spins wild conspiracy theories to profit from insecure times. There is little evidence of insincerity in his paranoia: Beck appears preoccupied with dangers posed by personal enemies as well, warding them off at public events with bulletproof vests and at home with a six-foot barrier that
surrounded his former Connecticut estate (Leibovich 2010, 37). Overall, scholars have little to gain from attempts to divine the hidden motivations behind statements of political belief. The intuition of outsiders is, after all, rarely neutral. Surely it is no coincidence that those with whom we disagree hide their true intentions; our side, whatever side it is, explains its heart-felt reasoning clearly, while their side prevaricates and obfuscates, motivated by political or selfish desires rather than honest belief. Such cynicism inspired Thomas Jefferson to observe that “if no action is to be deemed virtuous for which malice can imagine a sinister motive, then there never was a virtuous action” (Ford 1889, 307). No leaders (and few analysts), if we are to listen to their critics, ever partake in virtuous actions or articulate the genuine explanations for their views. For the analyst, however, there is rarely a need to doubt that people believe what they say, or to attempt to measure the percentage of sincerity versus that of opportunism. In the final analysis, it does not much matter whether people like Beck believe what they say. Their effect on the audience, and on the marketplace of ideas, is the same either way.

This does not imply that we must remain blind to the many entrepreneurs who have arisen to profit from the national anxiety, however. A virtual fear industry has grown, aided by 9/11, that has been a natural sponsor of, and partner with, Fox News. To take but one example, the “Vivos Group,” which manufactures custom-built, high-end bomb shelters for those hoping to ride out the apocalypse in comfort and style, has been both an advertiser on and a subject of Fox News reports. Beck, Sean Hannity and other talk radio hosts endlessly peddle gold and “food insurance” as tools with which listeners can provide for their families through the coming dark age. As is often the case, satirist Stephen Colbert captured this spirit best: “Nothing moves product like the hot stink of fear.”

Representations of society in the entertainment media are, if anything, worse. The people of the United States watch more television than any others, and the world they are exposed to on their sets is far more violent and dangerous than reality. According to one widely cited study, the typical American adolescent in the late 1980s witnessed upward of thirty thousand violent acts and eight thousand murders on television; today those numbers must be much higher (Hoberman 1990). People turn to fiction in part to escape their humdrum, boring lives, of course, and most are quite capable of separating reality from fantasy. The effect of continued, consistent exposure to hyper-violent shows and films on threat perceptions will vary from individual to individual, but over time their cumulative power should not be underestimated. Indeed, a good deal of experimental evidence suggests that belief formation can be profoundly affected by fictional representations of reality (Marsh, Meade and Roediger 2003; Marsh and Fazio 2006). Research on the effects of fictional violence on various aspects of society goes back decades, and although almost none of it directly examines the relationship of fiction to the national perception of risk, many sociologists mark the beginning of the obsession with threats and danger in Western societies to the 1970s, which is also when the real exponential growth of the media began. When people turn on their televisions—or their computers or phones—they are exposed to a world more frightening than the one they inhabit. “The more you read and watch,” according to Gardner (2008, 196), “the more you fear.” Despite the fact that violent crime has steadily declined all across the country for more than two decades, popular concern about it has not waned apace, as is clear from surveys and behavior, such as the rise of gated communities in many cities (Pinker 2011).

Kennan once observed that truth is a poor competitor in the marketplace of ideas. “The counsels of impatience and hatred can always be supported by the crudest and cheapest symbols,” he wrote (1951, 56). “For the counsels of moderation, the reasons are often intricate, rather than emotional, and difficult to explain. And so the chauvinists of all times and places go their appointed way: plucking the easy fruits, reaping the little triumphs of the day at the expense of someone else tomorrow, deluging in noise and filth anyone who gets in their way, dancing their reckless dance on the prospects for human progress.” While they probably receive more than their share of the
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blame for the various ills of society, as will be described next, it remains the case that the noise and filth produced by the American media are louder and thicker than in any other state.

The Insufficient Explanatory Power of Fear Appeals

Fear appeals are more prevalent in the United States than other countries and help account for heightened geopolitical fear. But they cannot shoulder all the blame. Politicians and media figures are as much products of their culture as they are its creators; they follow at least as much as they lead. Leaders surely understand what will resonate with their constituents and what will not, and no media outlets will long survive if their products do not strike a chord with the public. If the American people were not susceptible a priori, in other words, then leaders would not seek to scare them as part of their campaign or governing strategies, and media figures making fear appeals would not be able to find audiences. The success of these appeals reveals at least as much about the society and its previously held pathologies than it does about those who attempt to influence it. Politicians like Gingrich would not repeat apocalyptic warnings ad infinitum were they not popularly received, if they did not resonate viscerally with audiences.

“One anxiety about terrorism,” wrote John Mueller and Mark Stewart (2012, 110) regarding one major component of today’s geopolitical fear, “seems substantially to be a bottom-up phenomenon rather than one inspired by policymakers, risk entrepreneurs, politicians, and members of the media, who seem more nearly to be responding to the fears (and exacerbating them) than creating them.” That sagacious U.S. politicians realize scaring the public generates advantages at the ballot box is an observation about American society, not merely a condemnation of isolated political opportunism. Societies cannot be frightened if they are not predisposed to fear. Perhaps sixty years of threat inflation from official circles have had long-term, deeply pathological consequences; perhaps other factors have made the public unusually susceptible to fear appeals. Either way, large portions of the public seem to have developed beliefs about dangers and enemies that will take generations to change.

The media in particular receives a great deal of blame for the many ills in American society. It is everybody’s whipping post, the go-to scapegoat for politicians looking to deflect public ire away from themselves or moralists hoping to rid society of sin. Its power is easily exaggerated, however. Although the media can manufacture temporary panics, and though it certainly can magnify the threats its consumers perceive on a daily basis, it cannot generate lasting fear in audiences that are not somewhat predisposed to that reaction. If large segments of society did not already contain a sense of inherent risk, or a susceptibility to believing in present dangers, it would not react to Beck’s provocations and make him the third-most listened-to program in the United States. If the American public were not predisposed to buying threats, in other words, the media would not be effective in selling them (Furedi 1997, 52). One cannot fan a flame that does not already exist. As always, the media is as much an effect as a cause of trends in any society.

A number of other factors help to lay the foundation that makes American society such a receptive audience for those seeking to call attention to real or imagined threats. Its religious tradition, history, political culture and relative power combine to promote a unique, self-reinforcing blend of Manichaeism, exceptionalism and geopolitical fear in the United States. As is often the case in studies of international political psychology, these variables are not independent of one another, nor are they neatly measurable; they are instead interdependent and mutually reinforcing (Stein 1988, 248). Recognition of the various compounding factors can lead to the minimization of their effects and perhaps even a decrease in the pathological pressures of fear.

First, surveys have quite consistently found that religiosity in the United States is higher than in any other Western country, which has a very powerful effect on how many of its citizens perceive the outside world (Norris and Inglehart 2009). For the last sixty years, around 95 percent
of Americans have reported a belief in God, compared to about half of Europeans and Japanese (Lebow 2010, 220). This religiosity, as well as the rise of fundamentalist vis-à-vis mainline Protestant sects, has helped to forge a Manichean world view in the United States, the belief that in most cases there is right and wrong, black and white, evil and good (W. Mead 2006; Froese and Mencken 2009). America is not just a state pursuing its interests in anarchy but God’s agent on earth, the leader of the forces of light in their perpetual struggle against darkness. The people of the United States have long been more comfortable with the notion of evil as a tangible reality than are their more secular counterparts in Europe. Seven in ten Americans believe in the personal existence of the devil (Newport 2007), compared to half that number of Britons (Lieven 2004, 8). President Bush used “evil” as much as a noun as an adjective, pitting his administration against it wherever it reared its head. “We are in a conflict between good and evil,” he explained in 2002. “America will call evil by its name. . . . And we will lead the world in opposing it.”

Throughout its history, America’s enemies, from the Redcoats to the Kaiser to Iran, have not just been rivals but manifestations of malevolence. Decision makers with Manichean world views are more likely to interpret the actions of others as hostile and are less likely to compromise with those they see as the forces of darkness.

Manichaeism is also reinforced by exceptionalism, or the perception of moral and/or political superiority. While it appears natural for people to bask in the reflected glory of their country’s unique, nonpareil stature, Americans have long been exceptional in their exceptionalism (Davis and Lynn-Jones 1987; Lipset 1996; Madsen 1998). Beginning with the first settlers to arrive on its shores, the United States has never considered itself a normal country. Its people left the Old World both physically and psychologically to create a wholly different place, and to the extent that they felt different, of course they felt superior. A creation myth has grown regarding the beginnings of the country, making it seem less the result of natural volkswanderung and more that of divine intervention. The state was born under God’s protection and has continued that way ever since, a “shining city on a hill” that towers above all others in any number of ways.

Success breeds exceptionalism. It should not be entirely surprising that their rather astonishing record of achievement and meteoric rise to prominence have helped convince the American people of positive supernatural judgment. The first settlers discovered a new Garden of Eden and carved a perfect union out of its wilderness, guided by their secular saints, the founding fathers. From the rather unlikely revolution against the world’s strongest power to the swift conquest of a continent, the people of the United States appeared able to overcome even the longest odds. Anthropologist Margaret Mead (1943, 159) observed that Americans like to imagine themselves heirs of those who “virtually singlehanded—each man alone with an ax and a rifle—conquered a wilderness.” By the end of its first independent century, the United States had risen to be the largest industrial power in the world, one that was undefeated on the battlefield as well until the 1960s (as long as the War of 1812 could rather charitably be considered a draw). Its history contains many examples to support the belief that America can accomplish anything it puts its mind to, from putting men on the moon to finding treatments for AIDS. Many in the United States hold the view that the rest of the world would be much better off if it were to adopt the American way, since God is clearly on their side (Huntington 1981, ch. 2). Their country did not evolve; it is the result of intelligent design.

Americans have always combined this feeling of divine providence with a sense of mission to spread their ideals around the world and to battle evil wherever it lurks. Exceptionalism carries with it a strong evangelical impulse, the desire and at times obligation to remake the world in the U.S. image, or to make the world look more like Minnesota, to use the memorable formulation of George Quester (1980, 18). As a result, those instances when other countries have not proven to be ready converts come as a shock. Exceptional societies believe that deep down, whether they realize it or not, all people everywhere want to be like them (McCriskin 2003).
This evangelical fervor to promote good against the powers of evil is further propelled by one of the central elements of the American political culture: its so-called liberal tradition, which, as Louis Hartz famously argued, was inculcated in the United States from its inception and has been sustained for more than two centuries. According Hartz (1955, 285), the liberal tradition has its roots in the fact that this country was never feudal and did not have to engage in a violent class-based conflict to break the political power of a landed gentry. America was “born equal,” in other words, which has led it to display what he called a “colossal liberal absolutism,” at least in comparison with countries with a history of internal struggle. This liberalism is and has always been evangelical, and it “hampers creative action abroad by identifying the alien with the unintelligible, and inspires hysteria at home by generating the anxiety that unintelligible things produce.” Liberalism is an inherently moral ideology, one that “manifests expansionist urges,” according to Michael Desch (2007/08, 18). Its adherents seek to spread democracy and freedom to those areas of the world that have proven immune thus far. If freedom is imperiled anywhere, it represents to the liberal a threat to peace everywhere. Both political parties have internalized the liberal mission of the United States, which makes it a most unusual country, for better and for worse.

The United States may well have a number of built-in historical, political and cultural factors that make it more prone to pathological fear than other countries. But those factors alone would not have ignited such high levels of fear if the United States had not been blessed—or cursed—with tremendous relative power. Its fears might have remained dormant in a different international system, one that was not so completely dominated by one state. Today, the unipolar United States towers over all potential competitors in most measures of power, especially regarding its military and economy, notwithstanding the financial crisis that began in 2008. The truly remarkable aspect of the current structure of international power, as Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth have pointed out (2002, 2008), is the across-the-board dominance of the United States. Counterintuitively, however, great power often does not lead to great security, as logic might suggest it should, but to great fear.

As a general rule, the greater its power, the harder it is for a state is to disconnect vital interests from peripheral ones. As expansion occurs, new dangers are perceived that seem to require action, leading to further expansion and subsequent identification of new threats. Jack Snyder (2009, 41) has explained that for history’s great powers, “the preventive pacification of one turbulent frontier usually led to the creation of another one, adjacent to the first.” Examples are not difficult to find. Two millennia after its collapse, it is easy to forget that insecurity provided much of the inspiration for the growth of the Roman Empire. As historians have argued for centuries, its most prominent conquests, from Gaul to Dacia to Iberia, were driven not only by the desire for glory but also by the sincere belief that any untamed populations along its widening periphery could represent a threat to the empire (Errington 1971; Gruen 1986). Similar fears haunted the great European empires of the pre-modern and modern eras. The enormous size of the Spanish Empire, which at its height encompassed a quarter of the earth’s land area, meant its leaders could always detect a threat lurking somewhere. In 1626 King Philip IV was said to have lamented that “with as many kingdoms and lordships as have been linked to this crown, it is impossible to be without war in some area, either to defend what we have acquired or to divert our enemies” (Parker 1994, 119). Madrid spent itself into decline trying to address its many dangers, real and imagined (Elliott 1991). Great Britain also exhibited a high level of insecurity throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As the boundaries of the empire expanded, new dangers consistently appeared just over the horizon. British politicians and strategists felt that turbulence on colonial borders “pulled them toward expansion,” in the words of a prominent historian of the era (Galbraith 1960, 168; Robinson and Gallagher 1961). The notion that the empire could never be safe until all potential threats were addressed encouraged unnecessary forays into places that sapped Britain’s
strength, like Afghanistan, Uganda, Zululand and the Crimea. In all these cases, fear helped lead to blunders, overreach and eventual decline.

Rich people worry a great deal about their security. They build tall fences, install motion detectors and hire private security guards to protect themselves and their belongings from the throngs of have-nots they assume are plotting to take what is theirs. Wealth creates insecurity in individuals, and it seems to do so in states as well. Those who have more than what could be considered their fair share, perhaps bothered a bit by subconscious guilt, worry about losing what they have more than do those who live in relative penury. In international politics, the United States has the most, and fears the most, too. “America may be uniquely powerful in its global scope,” Zbigniew Brzezinski believes (2004, ix), so as a result “its homeland is also uniquely insecure.” That kind of thinking has a certain amount of intuitive appeal, even if it is utterly devoid of logic; if unchecked, it can lead to disaster.

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“How extraordinary!” observed Aaron Wildavsky in 1979 (32). “The richest, longest-lived, best protected, most resourceful civilization” on earth was “on its way to becoming the most frightened.” Geopolitical fear in the United States is remarkable both for its depth and for its lack of justification. Although its exact cause remains controversial, there are obvious contributors in the government, political system and media. However, fear appeals can only take the analysis so far; there are a host of other factors in American society and the international system that are necessary to explain the phenomenon. But whatever the explanation, it is clear that a heightened, irrational sense of anxiety has proven to be deeply pathological to American interests. It will continue to do so unless actively opposed by more rational, prudent forces in the marketplace of ideas.

National security, like personal security, is never absolute. Americans have to learn to live with some risk, preferably before it inspires further counterproductive actions. They need not be pathological in their fear, even in economically uncertain times, which, as historian Barbara Tuchman reminds us (1978, 542), tend to “nourish belief in conspiracies of evil.” They just need to remain aware of the high probability that today’s threats are in reality less dangerous then they first appear and to adjust their behavior accordingly.

Notes

1 Parts of this chapter are drawn from Fettweis (2013) and are reprinted with permission. On beliefs in foreign policy, see also Jervis (2009) and Mercer (2010).

2 Many academic fields deal with pathology in one form or another. Individual and group psychopathology has of course long been of interest to psychologists, but they are not alone. Mathematicians consider a pathological phenomenon to be one with atypically bad or counterintuitive properties (Dyson 1978). Sociologists, who have been discussing pathologies for more than a century, define the term as any factor that tends to inhibit societal or personal development, like poverty, crime or drug abuse. The century of sociological thought on this issue is well framed by Smith (1911), Lemert (1951) and Brown (1995). Although these uses of the term differ slightly, they all imply the presence of destructively irrational forces. For the purposes of this essay, pathologies may be considered to be mistaken or incorrect beliefs that inspire irrational action. For individuals as well as states, such beliefs create their own reality and drive behavior accordingly. Individuals maintain pathologies in their minds; state-level pathologies exist as shared irrational beliefs among leaders. Strategic pathologies, then, are incorrect beliefs that drive destructive state behavior. Geopolitical fear is one of many from which the United States suffers. See Fettweis (2013).

3 Another quarter (and a fifth of Council of Foreign Relations members) consider the dangers equivalent (Pew Center for the People and the Press 2009). See also Zenko and Cohen (2012).

4 The empirical and theoretical literature on this phenomenon is immense and growing, as one might expect. For some of the most up-to-date data and evidence, see Marshall and Cole (2011) and Human Security Centre (2010). Summaries, extrapolations, explanations and analyses can be found in Mueller (1989, 2004), Rosecrance (1999), Jervis (2002), Väyrynen (2006), Fettweis (2010), Lebow (2010), Goldstein (2011) and Pinker (2011).
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5 Russian voters, on the other hand, respond to fear stimuli much as Americans do (Oates, Kaid and Berry 2009).
6 For discussions of neoconservatism and its exceptionally high perceptions of threat, see Halper and Clarke (2005) and Bell (1989, 11–13).
7 Republican Presidential Debate, Mesa, Arizona, February 22, 2012. Gingrich made the argument that the world is a “fundamentally dangerous place” throughout his long career; see Gingrich (1995, 185), as well as virtually any speech or talk since.
9 Beck made the claim about George Brennan on March 11, 2013.
10 This observation draws on the literature on the “enemy image” and its effect on politics. See Volkan (1988), Finlay, Holsti and Fagen (1967) and, more generally, Jervis (1976).
12 For reviews of the history of the study of violence in the media, see Sparks and Sparks (2002), Glassner (1999) and Gardner (2008, 57–58).
13 George Bush, Graduation Speech at West Point, June 1, 2002.

References

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