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**Opinion Page**

**Fifty States of Fear**

*By*

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[The Stone](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/category/the-stone/) is a forum for contemporary philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless.

The British philosopher Bertrand Russell, writing as World War II was drawing to a close in Europe, observed that “neither a man nor a crowd nor a nation can be trusted to act humanely or to think sanely under the influence of a great fear.” Russell’s point was that irrational fear can propel us into counterproductive activities, ranging from unjust wars and the inhumane treatment of others to more mundane cases like our failure to seize opportunities to improve our everyday lives.

Just like authoritarian states, democracies can use fear to exert control over the populace and consolidate power.

It is hard to dispute Russell’s claim. We all know that fear can impair our judgment. We have passed up opportunities in our personal lives and we have also seen groups and nations do great harm and unravel because of their irrational fears. The 20th century was littered with wars and ethnic cleansings that were propelled in large measure by fear of a neighboring state or political or ethnic group. Given this obvious truth, one might suppose that modern democratic states, with the lessons of history at hand, would seek to minimize fear — or at least minimize its effect on deliberative decision-making in both foreign and domestic policy.

But today the opposite is frequently true. Even democracies founded in the principles of liberty and the common good often take the path of more authoritarian states. They don’t work to minimize fear, but use it to exert control over the populace and serve the government’s principal aim: consolidating power.

Philosophers have long noted the utility of fear to the state. Machiavelli notoriously argued that a good leader should induce fear in the populace in order to control the rabble.

Hobbes in “The Leviathan” argued that fear effectively motivates the creation of a social contract in which citizens cede their freedoms to the sovereign. The people understandably want to be safe from harm. The ruler imposes security and order in exchange for the surrender of certain public freedoms. As Hobbes saw it, there was no other way: Humans, left without a strong sovereign leader controlling their actions, would degenerate into mob rule. It is the fear of this state of nature — not of the sovereign per se, but of a world without the order the sovereign can impose — that leads us to form the social contract and surrender at least part of our freedom.

Most philosophers have since rejected this Hobbesian picture of human nature and the need for a sovereign. We have learned that democratic states can flourish without an absolute ruler. The United States of America was the original proof of concept of this idea: Free, self-governing people can flourish without a sovereign acting above the law. Even though the United States has revoked freedoms during wartime (and for some groups in peacetime), for most of its history the people have not been under the yoke of an all-powerful sovereign.

However, since 9/11 leaders of both political parties in the United States have sought to consolidate power by leaning not just on the danger of a terrorist attack, but on the fact that the possible perpetrators are frightening individuals who are not like us. As President George W. Bush put it before a joint session of Congress in 2001: “[They hate our freedoms](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html): our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.” Last year President Obama brought the enemy closer to home, arguing in a speech at the National Defense University that “[we face a real threat from radicalized individuals here in the United States](http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2013/05/23/prepared-text-obamas-speech-on-terrorism/)” — radicalized individuals who were “deranged or alienated individuals — often U.S. citizens or legal residents.”

Even the founder of Blackwater Worldwide, the military contractor, says that the American security state has gone too far.

The Bush fear-peddling is usually considered the more extreme, but is it? The Obama formulation puts the “radicalized individuals” in our midst. They could be American citizens or legal residents. And the subtext is that if we want to catch them we need to start looking within. The other is among us. The pretext for the surveillance state is thus established.

And let there be no mistake about the consolidation of power in the form of the new surveillance state. Recent revelations by Edward Snowden have shown an unprecedented program of surveillance both worldwide and on the American population. Even Erik Prince, the founder of the private military contractor Blackwater Worldwide thinks [the security state has gone too far](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/11/19/blackwater-founder-erik-prince-war-on-terror-has-become-too-big.html):

America is way too quick to trade freedom for the illusion of security. Whether it’s allowing the N.S.A to go way too far in what it intercepts of our personal data, to our government monitoring of everything domestically and spending way more than we should. I don’t know if I want to live in a country where lone wolf and random terror attacks are impossible ‘cause that country would look more like North Korea than America.

The widespread outrage over the new surveillance state has been great enough that President Obama announced on Friday that he would scale back some of its programs, but he remained strident in his overall support for aggressive surveillance.

The interesting thing about the security measures that are taken today is that they provide, as Prince puts it, the “illusion of security”; another way to put it is that they provide “security theater.” Or perhaps it is actually a theater of fear.

During the George W. Bush administration we were treated to the color-coded terror threat meter. It was presented as a way to keep us secure, but constantly wavering between orange and red, it was arguably a device to remind us to be fearful. Similarly for the elaborate Transportation Security Administration screenings at airports. Security experts are clear that these procedures are not making us safe, and that they are simply theater. The only question is whether the theater is supposed to make us feel safer or whether it is actually intended to remind us that [we are somehow in danger](http://www.economist.com/debate/days/view/822/CommentKey%3A1336075). The security expert Bruce Schneier suggests it is the latter:

By sowing mistrust, by stripping us of our privacy — and in many cases our dignity — by taking away our rights, by subjecting us to arbitrary and irrational rules, and by constantly reminding us that this is the only thing between us and death by the hands of terrorists, the T.S.A. and its ilk are sowing fear. And by doing so, they are playing directly into the terrorists’ hands.

The goal of terrorism is not to crash planes, or even to kill people; the goal of terrorism is to cause terror. … But terrorists can only do so much. They cannot take away our freedoms. They cannot reduce our liberties. They cannot, by themselves, cause that much terror. It’s our reaction to terrorism that determines whether or not their actions are ultimately successful. That we allow governments to do these things to us — to effectively do the terrorists’ job for them — is the greatest harm of all.

As the Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen notes in his book “A Philosophy of Fear,” Hobbes already anticipated the need for the sovereign to manipulate our fears. The state, Svendsen writes, “has to convince the people that certain things should be feared rather than others, since the people will not, just like that, fear what is appropriate from the point of view of the state. Hobbes points out that this can necessitate a certain amount of staging by the state, which magnifies certain phenomena and diminishes others.”

We are conditioned to fear persons in caves in Pakistan but not fatal industrial accidents or the work-related deaths of thousands of Americans every year.

One way in which our fears can be manipulated by the government is to lead us to fear the lesser danger. Schneier provides a simple example of this: 9/11 caused people to irrationally fear air travel and led them to the much more dangerous route of traveling in automobiles.

Another such example of this misdirection of fear took place in the case of the Boston Marathon bombings on April 15, in which the Boston Police Department effectively imposed martial law and seized control of people’s homes and used them as command posts in their effort to apprehend the perpetrators. The bombings were terrible (three people died and more than 260 were injured), but just two days later another terrible thing happened: a giant [explosion in a fertilizer plant in Texas](http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/18/us-usa-explosion-texas-idUSBRE93H02A20130418) killed at least 14 people and injured more than 160. For a moment we held our collective breath. Could it have been terrorists?

When we learned that it was probably an accident caused by the ignition of stored ammonium nitrate, a collective sigh of relief was heard, and then not another word about the event. But why? And what if the explosion in that factory was part of a larger problem of industrial safety? In fact, according to a report by the United States Congressional Research Service, thousands of industrial facilities across the country risk similar harm to nearby populations.

Meanwhile, [300,000 residents of West Virginia were without safe drinking water](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/12/west-virginia-chemical-spill-water_n_4585018.html) last week after 7,500 gallons of 4-methylcyclohexane methanol leaked into the Elk River from an industrial storage tank at a plant owned by a company called Freedom Industries. Few, if any, of the Sunday TV talk shows discussed the matter, but imagine the fear that would have been pedaled on those shows if *terrorists* had poisoned the water of those 300,000 Americans. Of course the danger is the same whether the cause is terrorism or corporate indifference and malfeasance.

Dangers are not limited to large scale events. In 2012, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 4,383 workers were killed on the job, and it has been at this level or higher since 9/11. In other words, we suffer a 9/11 every year in terms of workplace fatalities.

But the problem is not limited to workplace deaths. The A.F.L.-C.I.O. estimates another [50,000 die every year from occupational diseases](http://www.aflcio.org/Press-Room/Press-Releases/150-Workers-Die-Every-Day-From-Injuries-or-Occupational-Diseases-According-To-New-Report-on-Worker-Safety-and-Health). And none of this accounts for the thousands of workers who are permanently disabled each year.

In total, 54,000 Americans die every year due to work-related illnesses and accidents. This is the equivalent of 148 deaths each day; in terms of fatalities it is roughly a Boston Marathon bombing every half hour of every day.

But while we spend more than 7 billion dollars a year on the T.S.A.’s national security theater in which over 58,000 T.S.A. employees make sure we are not carrying too much toothpaste or shampoo onto airplanes, the budget for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration is under $600 million per year. It seems that our threat assessments are flawed.

We are conditioned to fear persons in caves in Pakistan but not the destruction of our water supply by frackers, massive industrial accidents, climate change or the work-related deaths of 54,000 American workers every year. Fear of outside threats has led us to ignore the more real dangers from within.

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Fear has also driven us to wage a “war on terror” that, as the political writer Jeremy Scahill has shown in his book “Dirty Wars,” creates still more enemies. As Scahill describes the results, the United States Special Forces kill lists of seven targets gave rise to kill lists of hundreds, which in turn gave rise to kill lists of thousands today. Does it not occur to the United States that the drone strikes and assassinations are creating more terrorists than they are neutralizing? Perhaps it has, but the calculation has been made that it does not matter. The newly minted enemies can be used to gin up more fear, more restrictions on our freedoms, and so the cycle goes.  One might argue that the United States has become a government of fear, by fear, and ultimately, for fear.

Obama’s drone wars also arise from Hobbesian assumptions about society — that the sovereign, enlisted to impose order, is above the law. The sovereign is free to do whatever is in his power to impose order. If the United States must be in charge of providing order in the world, then its sovereign is above the law. Here lie the roots of so-called American exceptionalism.

Svendsen describes the dynamic thus: “The social contract is absolutely binding on all citizens, but the sovereign himself is not subject to the contract that he undertakes to guarantee. Similarly, the U.S. is conceived as being the guarantor of a civilized world, as the country that can maintain moral order, but that stands outside this order.” Fear is driving the United States to believe it is above the law.

Fear is even used to prevent us from questioning the decisions supposedly being made for our safety. The foundation of this approach in our government can be traced back to burning rubble of the World Trade Center, exemplified by this statement by John Ashcroft, then the attorney general of the United States, in December 2001: “To those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty, my message is this. Your tactics only aid terrorists, for they erode our national unity and diminish our resolve. They give ammunition to America’s enemies, and pause to America’s friends.”

As Svendsen points out, Ashcroft’s reasoning is straight out of the playbook of the German legal philosopher Carl Schmitt, who was notorious for defending Hitler’s extrajudicial killings of his political enemies. Schmitt too felt that national unity was critical and that liberty should be subjugated to safety. Svendsen writes:

A political act consists in maintaining one’s own existence and destroying those that threaten it, and there is little room for overcoming conflicts via discussion. Such political action is the sole right of the state, and in order to maintain itself the state must also eliminate all enemies within, that is, all those who do not fit into a homogeneous unity. Every genuine political theory, according to Schmitt, must assume that man is evil, that man is a dangerous being. It is here, in the fear of what humans can do to each other, that the state finds the justification of its own existence — the ability of the state to protect one is the argument for submitting to it.

Fear is a primal human state. From childhood on, we fear the monsters of our imaginations, lurking in dark closets, under beds, in deserted alleyways, but we also now fear monsters in the deserts of Yemen and the mountains of Pakistan. But perhaps it is possible to pause and subdue our fears by carefully observing reality — just as we might advise for trying to calm and comfort a fear-stricken child. We might find that, in reality, the more immediate danger to our democratic society comes from those who lurk in the halls of power in Washington and other national capitols and manipulate our fears to their own ends.

What are these ends? They are typically the protection of moneyed interests. In 1990, the Secretary of State James Baker tried to make the case for the first Gulf War on economic grounds. “The economic lifeline of the industrial world,” he said, “runs from the gulf and we cannot permit a dictator such as this to sit astride that economic lifeline.”

Images of mushroom clouds, environmental terrorists and agents of mayhem were all used to justify excessive actions that served to protect corporate interests.

That rationale, although honest, did not resonate with the American people — it hardly seemed to justify war. The George W. Bush administration abandoned the economic justification and turned to fear as a motivator. We were told that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. If we did not act against him, the national security adviser Condoleezza Rice argued, the next thing we would see might be a “mushroom cloud.”

This playbook of fear has not been limited to motivating military actions. Environmentalists, once ridiculed as “tree-huggers” are now often characterized as “environmental terrorists” — as individuals we should fear and neutralize. The hacktivist Jeremy Hammond, who exposed the nefarious dealings of the private intelligence corporation Stratfor and its clients, was characterized as someone seeking to cause “mayhem” by Federal District Judge Loretta Preska when she sentenced him to 10 years in prison.

In each case, the images of mushroom clouds, environmental terrorists and agents of mayhem were used to justify actions that would otherwise seem excessive – all in the service of protecting corporate interests.

Whatever their motivation, by using fear to induce the rollback of individual rights, politicians, judges and lawmakers are working against the hard-won democratic principles and ideals that we and other democracies have defended for almost 250 years. They are manipulating our fears to undo centuries of democratic reform. And it doesn’t matter if the empowered leader is called a king or a prime minister or a president; the end result is that fear has been used to place us back under the yoke of Hobbes’s sovereign and Machiavelli’s prince.

Yet ultimately we are not powerless. We can *resist* the impulse to be afraid. We may not at the moment have answers to the very real dangers that we face in this world, but we can begin to identify those dangers and seek solutions once we overcome our fear. Or as Bertrand Russell rather more elegantly put it, as World War II was drawing to a close, “to conquer fear is the beginning of wisdom.”



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