

FOREWORD

by Tom Woods

WE ARE TOLD THAT what makes our system great is that we make political decisions through rational discussion, not the arbitrary fiat of the kings of yore. But in fact, the last thing the state wants is calm deliberation. It thrives on fear. Government power tends to expand no matter what, to be sure, but it expands much more rapidly under what are perceived as emergency conditions. Give us more power, citizen! There's no time to lose!

Government officials push this line because they know that power once granted is almost never relinquished. All they need to do is trick the public into accepting the latest rationale for additional rounds of government expansion. The people may later repent of their haste in consenting to this episode of government growth, but these second thoughts rarely amount to full-fledged campaigns of repeal, especially since they'd be up against the power and institutional inertia of entrenched bureaucracy, which rarely yields ground.

The exploitation of the public through fear is not limited to left or right. It is common to both sides of what we laughingly call our political spectrum. The left spins tales of wicked businessmen, who without the benevolent hand of government would lord it over the rest of us, and who would churn out poison sandwiches and exploding

computer monitors. The right warns us of foreign malefactors who have no rational motivations or identifiable grievances. They wish only to pursue evil, we are told, and they attack the United States not because of anything the U.S. government has done, but simply out of envy at the sheer awesomeness of the American people. (The establishment left gets in on this act, too, having in fact supported every major American war since World War I.)

When it comes to war, our political class has given us no reason not to be skeptical of its breathless claims. Few major American wars have not relied for their popular appeal on some deliberately cultivated falsehood. A few recent examples might include the alleged Gulf of Tonkin incident (Vietnam), babies being tossed out of incubators (Iraq I), “genocide” (Kosovo, where “hundreds of thousands” of dead turned out to be 2000 dead on both sides of a civil war combined), weapons of mass destruction (Iraq II), and many others besides. Tony Blair warned that Saddam Hussein’s unmanned drones could reach the United Kingdom within 45 minutes. Saddam’s entire drone program turned out to be a single prototype of plywood and string. But the story served its purpose: why, we’ve got to “get Saddam,” a two-bit nobody that no Westerner in his right mind had been concerned about just ten minutes earlier.

The two sides came together in the Panic of 2008 to push through all manner of ill-conceived bailouts, which we know in retrospect—as if we didn’t know it at the time—made no sense. For example, normal bankruptcy proceedings for AIG would not have destroyed the economy or sent Main Street banks reeling, as we were solemnly assured it would. Main Street banks had zero exposure to the credit-default swap problem facing AIG. Had anyone bothered to check, they would have found that a grand total of about a dozen financial institutions around the world would have taken a hit. The combined capitalization of those dozen firms was \$20 trillion. The loss they would have taken was in the neighborhood of \$60 billion—a few months’ worth of bonuses, in other words.

No wonder the political class insisted there was no time for us to look closely at these deals.

Now this episode was a little different: it was not a case of using the public's fear to stampede the people into granting still more power to the federal government. The public was in fact overwhelmingly opposed to the bailouts, a sentiment to which the flood of angry phone calls to congressional offices provided ample testimony. Instead, the political establishment chided the public for not being appropriately fearful, and went on to carry out government policy based on fear they insisted the people should have had. Yes, yes, we're sorry we have to do this, the official line ran, and we're sorry we have to do it so quickly and without deliberation, and we're sorry we have to ignore your opinions, but trust us: this is really scary, and although we'd prefer not to put it this way, you stupid rubes are too simple to understand the terrible danger involved.

In general, government cultivates fear among the public, and in turn exploits that fear on behalf of increases in its own power. Connor Boyack examines this process in a sophisticated and compelling way in this valuable book. But he does more than simply identify the problem. He explains how to thwart government's use of fear, and how we can keep our heads as government tries to send us into a panic. If these lessons are absorbed, the next time government sets out to expand its power in light of some crisis, it won't be able to play Americans like a fiddle.

INTRODUCTION

*“Timid men... prefer the calm of despotism to
the tempestuous sea of liberty.”¹*

—Thomas Jefferson

AT THE BRINK OF WAR with France in 1798, the U.S. Congress passed a collection of laws referred to as the Alien and Sedition Acts. Described by their Federalist proponents as “war measures,” the Democrat-Republican opponents saw them as unconstitutional and indefensible. While each of the four laws was claimed to be a response to escalating tensions with France, they were mostly a political weapon to be used against members of the minority (Democrat-Republican) party.

One of the laws, the Naturalization Act, increased the time immigrants had to wait for citizenship and voting rights from 5 to 14 years. As immigrants tended to favor Thomas Jefferson’s Democrat-Republican party (commonly referred to simply as Republicans), the Federalist intent of this law was to minimize the growth, and therefore the power, of the opposition. As one Federalist said in congressional debate, “[I do] not wish to invite hordes of... the turbulent and disorderly of all parts of the world, to come here with a view to

disturb our tranquility, after having succeeded in the overthrow of their own governments.”²

Two of the four laws, the Alien Enemies Act and the Alien Friends Act, purportedly granted authority to the president to deport an alien who was either deemed dangerous or who was from a country at war with the United States. The worst of the four laws, the Sedition Act, criminalized speech by punishing any person who wrote or printed “false, scandalous and malicious writing” against Congress or the president that meant to “defame... or to bring them, or either of them, into contempt or disrepute; or to excite against them... the hatred of the good people of the United States...”³ (Notably, the Sedition Act did not punish such speech against the vice president, Thomas Jefferson, who was not a Federalist.) President John Adams signed the Acts into law on June 14, nine years to the day after the French Revolution began.

Understanding the controversy behind these laws requires a bit of context and helps set the stage for the subject we’ll be discussing in this book. Political parties were a new development in American politics, and deep divisions quickly emerged as various factions in the government rallied around the important issues of the day. While domestic differences created contention between the Federalist and Democratic-Republican parties, nothing made their blood boil like foreign affairs. Though citizens of a new, independent nation, Americans remained interested in—and greatly affected by—European politics. The Federalists sided with Britain in its conflict against France, as they were worried about the mob rule they saw rising out of the ashes of France’s former monarchical system and the radical ideas that tended to germinate from such political chaos. On the other hand, Republicans favored the French and supported their newfound ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. They saw in France echoes of America’s own fight for freedom.

With control of Congress and the presidency, the Federalists took advantage of their political power to crack down on their enemies

and ensure that France's influence would be minimized in America. But rather than targeting and deporting French immigrants accused of insurrection, Federalists focused on their political rivals who were perceived to be sympathetic towards—if not outwardly supportive of—France's ideals and methods. Under the assumed authority of the Alien and Sedition Acts, federal officials arrested twenty-five men, most of whom were editors of Republican newspapers.

Matthew Lyon, a Republican congressman from Vermont, became the first person to be put on trial under the Sedition Act. Lyon had written a letter published in the paper for which he was an editor, criticizing Adams's "continued grasp for power."⁴ A federal grand jury indicted Lyon for intentionally stirring up hatred against the president. He was later sentenced by a Federalist judge to four months in jail and a \$1,000 fine, having been convicted by the jury (assembled from Vermont towns that were Federalist strongholds) for expressing seditious words with "bad intent."⁵ Among those arrested was the grandson of Benjamin Franklin, who worked as the editor of the *Philadelphia Democrat-Republican Aurora*, and who was charged with libeling President Adams and thus encouraging sedition among his readers. Thomas Cooper, editor of the *Sunbury and Northumberland Gazette*, was likewise indicted for sedition, fined \$400, and made to serve six months in jail. Criticism of the government had become treason against the United States.

Many themes can be observed in the events of 1798: national security in a fledgling nation; partisan rivalry among men who had previously fought side by side in the American Revolution; the destabilizing influence of a heavy influx of immigrants; and the impact of foreign affairs on American politics. However, another (less discernible) theme merits special attention, as it pervaded the political process prior to, during, and after the enactment of the Alien and Sedition Acts: fear.

As David McCullough writes in his biography of John Adams, "There was rampant fear of the enemy within"⁶ during this era. For

Federalists, that enemy was French immigrants whose very existence suggested the potential for French Revolution spillover into America. Republicans, on the other hand, considered the Federalists the real “enemy within,” fearing increased government power with its corresponding centralization and likely abuse. In some cases, fear was a natural and reasonable response to chaotic circumstances. But in other ways, fear was manufactured by influential individuals hoping to consolidate power and enact a desired policy.

To be sure, uncertainty permeated the political process in America’s early years. The very real threat of attack on the budding nation gave urgency to settling the controversy over national security issues. Interestingly, although the United States of America has emerged from her early days of extreme vulnerability to become a world superpower, the theme of fear seems as ever-present today as it was back then. As John Adams himself once wrote, “Fear is the foundation of most governments.”⁷ Some things, it seems, never change.

Fear is simply part of the human condition—a motivating influence upon our thoughts and actions. Its emotional irrationality leads otherwise intelligent people to abandon logic and wisdom; as Edmund Burke once said, “No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear.”⁸ It incapacitates its victim, encouraging him to fecklessly submit to others’ proposed solutions. These supposed solutions are often offered by conniving conspirators looking to capitalize on the individual’s defenselessness, much like a predator inducing a temporary state of paralysis in its prey. Rather than acting, the fearful person is acted upon.

For this reason, despots and authoritarians have historically studied and utilized this raw emotion to pursue their goals. Political campaigns are built upon fear. Propaganda can’t work without it. The centralization of power is a natural extension of it. When Adams referred to fear as the foundation of most governments, it was not merely a rhetorical flourish. Even the primary role of government—physical protection of the citizenry—implies the fear of future attack.

As the state has grown, and as political power has concentrated, entire groups of people are motivated to action on any given issue, whether at the ballot box or protesting in the streets, using fear.

Rahm Emanuel, then White House Chief of Staff, stated in a 2008 interview, “You don’t ever want a crisis to go to waste; it’s an opportunity to do important things that you would otherwise avoid.”⁹ Crises generate fear of the unknown and of the future, and Emanuel’s observation highlights the political expediency of taking advantage of such situations to advance policies that people would likely reject, absent such fear.

Conservatives predictably erupted in feigned horror at Emanuel’s statement, shocked that the “left” could dare use this tactic to their political advantage. “Who’s out there saying [what Emanuel said]?” asked Glenn Beck. “Is it Russia, is it Venezuela, is it the Middle East, is it extremists, is it anarchists here in America, is it the United Nations, is it our own progressives here in America that would like to overturn much of the Constitution, that would like to change America into a socialistic state?”¹⁰ To Rush Limbaugh, Emanuel was “talking about agenda items of the Democrat Party... He’s talking about himself, his party, the Democrat Party and their agenda. He’s not talking about you.”¹¹

These and other conservative pundits and politicians united together in asserting that such an audacious strategy is relegated only to the “Chicago-style” politics of the progressive left. Though uncharacteristically frank, Emanuel’s acknowledgment should not come as a shock, nor should it be seen as something belonging only to one political group. As this book will explain, individuals exploiting crises—whether spontaneous or manufactured—is a commonplace occurrence. As the sociologist David Altheide has explained, “Fear does not just happen; it is socially constructed and then manipulated by those who seek to benefit.”¹²

Who stands to gain from manipulating the masses through fear? Many businessmen exploit fear in markets to increase profits and

drive competitors into the ground. Some religious leaders find fear a useful tool to encourage submission and loyalty. War profiteers increase their bottom line when politicians exaggerate threats to security. Even domineering spouses or playground bullies rely upon the fear of their victims to gain control. In short, anybody seeking power over another person finds fear a useful tool, and it is for that very reason that politicians stand to gain so much through its use.

Because fear is universal, and because it is so often used by power-seeking individuals in government, those who oppose the state's interference in their lives must recognize, understand, and counteract it. To the extent that people allow their fears to affect their political opinions and corresponding actions, they will increasingly enable the very people who exploit that state of fear to gain control. Freedom shrinks with each new crisis exploited by the ruling class. Any person interested in preserving freedom must rationally study the issues on their merits. More importantly, we must persuade others to recognize the pattern of fear that pervades politics, whether in the policies themselves or in the arguments used to justify them.

Manufactured fear is a societal plague, and there have been widespread casualties. We need an antidote, since few have been properly inoculated against its devastating impact. The intent of this book is to offer the needed immunization—helping you, the reader, to recognize and reject fear so you can become free.

NOTES

1. Letter to M. Mazzei, Minerva (New York: 1791).
2. Joseph M. Lynch, *Negotiating the Constitution: The Earliest Debates Over Original Intent* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1999), 177.
3. Edwin Williams, ed., *The Book of the Constitution* (New York: Peter Hill, 1833), 72.
4. House of Representatives, *Volume of Speeches Delivered in Congress, 1840* (Washington: Globe Office, 1840).
5. Zechariah Chafee, Jr., *Freedom of Speech in War Times* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1919), 16.
6. David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 505.
7. George A. Peek, Jr., ed., *The Political Writings of John Adams: Representative Selections* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2003), 85.
8. James Prior, ed., *The Works of The Right Honorable Edmund Burke, vol. 1* (London: Bell & Sons, 1886), 88.
9. “Obama, Assembling Team, Turns to the Economy,” *New York Times*, November 7, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/07/us/politics/07obama.html>.
10. “Glenn Beck – Emanuel: ‘You never want a serious crisis to go to waste,’” GlennBeck.com, November 21, 2008, http://www.glennbeck.com/content/articles/article/198/18490?sid=198&elid=18490&PAGE_GEN_5=410.
11. “Set Americans Free, Democrats! Follow the Wal-Mart Example,” RushLimbaugh.com, Nov. 21, 2008, http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2008/11/21/set_american_free_democrats_follow_the_wal_mart_example.
12. D.L. Altheide, *Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crisis* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter), 24.