

The Politics of Fear in America: A Nation at War with Itself
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“Fear is the foundation of most governments.” – John Adams¹

Turn on the TV or flip open the newspaper on any given day, and you will find yourself accosted by reports of government corruption, corporate malfeasance, militarized police and marauding SWAT teams.² America is entering a new phase, one in which children are arrested in schools,³ military veterans are forcibly detained by government agents because of the content of their Facebook posts, and law-abiding Americans are being subjected to the latest in government spy technology⁴.

These threats to our freedoms are not to be underestimated. Yet even more dangerous than these violations of our basic rights is the language they are couched in—the language of fear. It is a language spoken effectively by politicians on both sides of the aisle, shouted by media pundits from their cable TV pulpits, marketed by corporations, and codified into bureaucratic laws that do little to make our lives safer or more secure.

This language of fear has given rise to a politics of fear whose only aim is to distract and divide us. In this way, we have been discouraged from thinking analytically and believing that we have any part to play in solving the problems before us. Instead, we have been conditioned to point the finger at the *other* Person or vote for *this* Politician or support *this* Group, because they are the ones who will fix it. Except that *they* can't and won't fix the problems plaguing our communities.

No amount of freedom has ever been won by sitting back and watching things play out, or by voting for a certain person, or giving money to a certain group. Freedom is won through action, not just in terms of nonviolent protest or petition (which are vital), but in terms of daily interactions with friends and neighbors, discussing the issues and how best to equip communities to deal with daily challenges. Freedom is won most effectively by taking a stand, starting at the local level, whether it's challenging the influx of profit-driven red light cameras at street intersections, taking issue with a school board decision that sends a message to young people that they have no rights, or demanding that local police de-militarize.

These small acts of rebellion are what win us our rights. Yet as information technology rapidly advances and mindless entertainment proliferates, this type of “free” thinking is being squelched. In the absence of individuals who will stand up for themselves and their freedoms, it is all too easy for the politics of fear to gain traction. Having abdicated our responsibilities as citizens, we have ceded power to bureaucrats and government officials who, with our tacit approval, continue to dismantle our basic rights while providing an illusion of safety and security. This lack of ownership and willingness to

¹ <http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Fear>

² Natasha Lennard, “Police shoot dead mentally ill double-amputee,” *Salon*, (September 25, 2012), http://www.salon.com/2012/09/25/police_shoot_dead_mentally_ill_double_amputee/.

³ S.e. Smith, “Police Handcuffing 7-Year-Olds? The Brutality Unleashed on Kids With Disabilities in Our School Systems,” *Alternet*, (May 22, 2012), http://www.alternet.org/story/155526/police_handcuffing_7-year-olds_the_brutality_unleashed_on_kids_with_disabilities_in_our_school_systems/?page=entire.

⁴ “Speak up: US law enforcement to use Russian software to store millions of voices,” *Russia Today*, (September 23, 2012), <http://rt.com/usa/news/law-enforcement-voice-recognition-759/>.

engage in self-government on the part of the American people has, in turn, given rise to the rapid militarization of the police over the past 40 years, the criminalization of non-threatening activities such as gathering with friends and family in the privacy of one's home for prayer and worship, the surveillance dragnet which now tracks virtually every American, and the general sense that we no longer have any control over our government.

A perfect example of this masterful use of the politics of fear to cow the populace is the government's War on Drugs. Reputedly a response to crime and poverty in inner cities and suburbia, it has been the driving force⁵ behind the militarization of the police, at all levels, over the past 40 years. While it has failed to decrease drug use, it has exacerbated social problems by expanding⁶ America's rapidly growing prison system and allowing police *carte blanche* access to our homes and personal property.

Undeterred by its failure to check drug use, the governmental machine keeps chugging along. Consider that in 2011, half a billion dollars' worth of military equipment flowed from the military to local police, with another \$400 million worth of equipment reaching local police by May 2012. In addition to direct transfers of equipment, the federal government has given local police departments grants totaling \$34 billion since 9/11. The 50-person police department in Oxford, Alabama, for example, has acquired \$3 million worth of equipment, including M-16s, infrared goggles, and an armored vehicle.⁷ All of these new toys lead to specious SWAT team raids that eviscerate the Fourth Amendment, acclimating us to the vision of police in jackboots with assault rifles patrolling our streets.

Enter the War on Terror, the logical endpoint of constructing government policy based upon fear and paranoia. Marked by constant surveillance, torture, kidnapping, extrajudicial killing by our government, and the resulting loss of our basic rights, the War on Terror is the culmination of a mentality of fear cultivated by the political elite and willingly accepted by the American people.

A case in point is the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in the aftermath of 9/11. Supposedly tasked with protecting the American homeland from terrorist threats, DHS has become more of a domestic army than a security agency. For example, in March 2012, defense contractor ATK agreed to produce 450 million hollow point rounds to be used by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and its Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) office.⁸ DHS placed another order for 750 million rounds of various ammunition in August 2012.⁹

DHS is just one of many aspects of a total militarization of government which has been taking place since the 1980s and rapidly advancing since 9/11. Consider that in August 2012, the Social Security

⁵ Radley Balko, "A Decade After 9/11, Police Departments Are Increasingly Militarized," *The Huffington Post*, (November 12, 2011), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/12/police-militarization-9-11-september-11_n_955508.html.

⁶ Stephen Gutwillig, "America needs strategy to exit its longest war," *Daily News*, (June 16, 2011), http://www.dailynews.com/opinions/ci_18294627.

⁷ Lorenzo Franceschi-Bicchierai, "Small-Town Cops Pile Up on Useless Military Gear," *Wired*, (June 26, 2012), <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2012/06/cops-military-gear/all/>.

⁸ Eloise Lee and Robert Johnson, "The Department Of Homeland Security Is Buying 450 Million New Bullets," *Business Insider*, (March 28, 2012), <http://www.businessinsider.com/us-immigration-agents-are-loading-up-on-as-many-as-450-million-new-rounds-of-ammo-2012-3>.

⁹ Paul Joseph Watson, "DHS To Purchase Another 750 Million Rounds Of Ammo," *Prison Planet*, (August 13, 2012), <http://www.prisonplanet.com/dhs-to-purchase-another-750-million-rounds-of-ammo.html>.

Administration (SSA) placed an order for 174,000 rounds of hollow point ammunition.¹⁰ The SSA plans to send the ammunition to 41 locations throughout the United States, including major cities such as Los Angeles, Detroit, and Philadelphia, among others.¹¹

It's unclear why the SSA would need hollow point bullets, which are designed to explode upon entry into the body, causing massive organ damage. However, it's worth noting that DHS and SSA have already collaborated in police exercises. In January 2012, Federal Protective Service officers with DHS conducted a training exercise at the SSA office in Leesburg, Florida. One officer carrying a semi-automatic assault rifle randomly checked IDs as people filed into the building, while other officers combed the building with K-9 units. The exercise was part of the larger Operation Shield, which, according to DHS officials, involves federal officers randomly showing up to government buildings throughout the country in order to test the effectiveness of their security procedures.¹²

DHS and SSA aren't the only agencies beefing up their ammunition stockpiles. In August 2012, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which houses the National Weather Service, requested 46,000 hollow point bullets to be sent to locations in Maine, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Florida,¹³ as well as 500 paper targets.¹⁴ The NOAA later released a statement claiming that the ammunition is intended for the Fisheries Office of Law Enforcement which is entrusted to "enforce[e] laws that conserve and protect our nation's living marine resources and their natural habitat."¹⁵

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and its state level counterparts are also becoming militarized. Consider the increasingly violent campaign against raw milk farmers in recent years. In April 2008, Mark Nolt, a Mennonite raw milk farmer, was arrested in a raid on his property involving six state troopers and a representative of the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture.¹⁶ In April 2010, Dan Allyger, an Amish raw milk farmer in Pennsylvania, was subjected to a predawn raid conducted by agents from the FDA, US Marshals, and a state trooper.¹⁷

These police exercises are the result of government policies engineered to maximize fear and paranoia. Yet they are only possible because of the acquiescence of the American people to all government

¹⁰ "Request for Quote for Ammunition," *Federal Business Opportunities*, https://www.fbo.gov/index?s=opportunity&mode=form&id=6c39a2a9f00a10187a1432388a3301e5&tab=core&_cview=0&fb_source=message.

¹¹ Paul Joseph Watson, "Social Security Administration To Purchase 174 Thousand Rounds Of Hollow Point Bullets," *Infowars*, (August 15, 2012), <http://www.infowars.com/social-security-administration-to-purchase-174-thousand-rounds-of-hollow-point-bullets/>.

¹² Millard K. Ives, "Training exercise startles locals," *The Daily Commercial*, (January 4, 2012), <http://www.dailycommercial.com/News/LakeCounty/010412shield>.

¹³ "13--Ammunition and Shooting Targets," *Federal Business Opportunities*, https://www.fbo.gov/index?s=opportunity&mode=form&tab=core&id=bfd95987a1ad9a6dfb22bca4a19150cb&_cview=0.

¹⁴ Paul Joseph Watson, "National Weather Service Follows DHS In Huge Ammo Purchase," *Infowars*, (August 14, 2012), <http://www.infowars.com/national-weather-service-follows-dhs-in-huge-ammo-purchase/>.

¹⁵ Jason Samenow, "National Weather Service 'ammunition' solicitation triggers confusion," *The Washington Post*, (August 14, 2012), http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/capital-weather-gang/post/national-weather-service-ammunition-solicitation-triggers-confusion/2012/08/14/3dc6b67e-e62a-11e1-936a-b801f1abab19_blog.html.

¹⁶ Linn Cohen-Cole, "A Mennonite Farmer is Hauled Away," *Counterpunch*, (April 26, 2008), <http://www.counterpunch.org/2008/04/26/a-mennonite-farmer-is-hauled-away/>.

¹⁷ Carolyn Lochhead, "Dan Allyger latest target in FDA war on raw milk," *San Francisco Chronicle*, (May 22, 2011), <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Dan-Allgyer-latest-target-in-FDA-war-on-raw-milk-2371056.php>.

programs relating to “security” since 9/11. Despite the fact that violent crime rates are low,¹⁸ and terrorist attacks are radically unlikely (in fact, one is more likely to die in a car wreck or be struck by lightning than be killed by a terrorist)¹⁹, we are seeing government agencies “protecting” us by harassing, arresting, and sometimes killing our friends and neighbors, all in the name of security. This is the inertia of government bureaucracy. Created during moments of fear, such agencies and the corporate entities that benefit from them always resist change once a citizenry gathers their senses and demands are made for the restoration of free government.

Thus, fear is the root of the problem. The only thing which will improve our present condition is the taming of our fear. We must act on courage. Courage to think differently, speak loudly, and challenge directly the systems which we know to be unjust. Voting will do precious little to circumvent the politics of fear which Democrats and Republicans use to justify their attacks on our personal liberties. As author Mark Vernon has noted, “...the politics of fear plays on an assumption that people cannot bear the uncertainties associated with [risk]. Politics then becomes a question of who can better deliver an illusion of control.”²⁰

WC: 1512

¹⁸ Jerry Markon, “Violent crime in U.S. on the decline,” *The Washington Post*, (May 25, 2010), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/24/AR2010052402210.html>.

¹⁹ Ronald Bailey, “How Scared of Terrorism Should You Be?,” *Reason*, (September 6, 2011), <http://reason.com/archives/2011/09/06/how-scared-of-terrorism-should>.

²⁰ <http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Fear>