The Assault on Reason
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Chapter 1

The Politics of Fear

Fear is the most powerful enemy of reason. Both fear and reason are essential to human survival, but the relationship between them is unbalanced. Reason may sometimes dissipate fear, but fear frequently shuts down reason. As Edmund Burke wrote in England twenty years before the American Revolution, "No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear."

Our Founders had a healthy respect for the threat fear poses to reason. They knew that, under the right circumstances, fear can trigger the temptation to surrender freedom to a demagogue promising strength and security in return. They worried that when fear displaces reason, the result is often irrational hatred and division. As Justice Louis D. Brandeis later wrote:

"Men feared witches and burnt women."

Understanding this unequal relationship between fear and reason was crucial to the design of American self-government.

Our Founders rejected direct democracy because of concerns that fear might overwhelm reflective thought. But they counted heavily on the ability of a "well-informed citizenry" to reason together in ways that would minimize the destructive impact of illusory, exaggerated, or excessive fears. "When a man seriously reflects on the precariousness of human affairs, he will become convinced that it is infinitely wiser and safer to form a constitution of our own in a cool deliberate manner, while we have it in our power," wrote Thomas Paine in his legendary pamphlet Common Sense, specifically warning that the Founders should not take the risk of waiting until some fear seized the public imagination, in which event their reasoning processes would be hampered.

Nations succeed or fail and define their essential character by the way they challenge the unknown and cope with fear. And much depends on the quality of their leadership. If leaders exploit public fears to herd people in directions they might not otherwise choose, then fear itself can quickly become a self-perpetuating and freewheeling force that drains national will and weakens national character, diverting attention from real threats deserving of healthy and appropriate fear and sowing confusion about the essential choices that every nation must constantly make about its future.

Leadership means inspiring us to manage through our fears. Demagoguery means exploiting our fears for political gain. There is a crucial difference.

Fear and anxiety have always been a part of life and always will be. Fear is ubiquitous and universal in every human society. It is a normal part of the human condition. And it

has always been an enemy of reason. The Roman philosopher and rhetoric teacher Lactantius wrote, "Where fear is present, wisdom cannot be."

We have always defined progress by our success in managing through our fears. Christopher Columbus, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Susan B. Anthony, and Neil Armstrong all found success by challenging the unknown and overcoming fear with courage and a sense of proportion that helped them overcome legitimate fears without being distracted by distorted and illusory fears.

The Founders of our country faced dire threats. If they failed in their endeavors, they would have been hanged as traitors. The very existence of our country was at risk. Yet in the teeth of those dangers, they insisted on establishing the freedoms that became the Bill of Rights. Are members of Congress today in more danger than were their predecessors when the British army marched on the Capitol?

Are the dangers we now face so much greater than those that led Franklin Delano Roosevelt to famously remind us that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself? Is America in more danger now than when we faced worldwide fascism on the march—when our fathers fought and won a world war on two fronts simultaneously?

Is the world more dangerous than when we faced an ideological enemy with thousands of missiles poised to annihilate our country at a moment's notice? Fifty years ago, when the nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union was raising tensions in the world and McCarthyism was threatening our liberties at home, President Dwight Eisenhower belatedly said, "Any who act as if freedom's defenses are to be found in suppression and suspicion and fear confess a doctrine that is alien to America." Edward R. Murrow, whose courageous journalism was assaulted by Senator Joseph McCarthy, declared, "We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason."

It is simply an insult to those who came before us and sacrificed so much on our behalf to imply that we have more to be fearful of than they did. In spite of the dangers they confronted, they faithfully protected our freedoms. It is up to us to do the same.

Yet something is palpably different today. Why in the early years of the twenty-first century are we so much more vulnerable to the politics of fear? There have always been leaders willing to fan public anxieties in order to present themselves as the protectors of the fearful. Demagogues have always promised security in return for the surrender of freedom. Why do we seem to be responding differently today?

The single most surprising new element in America's national conversation is the prominence and intensity of constant fear. Moreover, there is an uncharacteristic and persistent confusion about the sources of that fear; we seem to be having unusual difficulty in distinguishing between illusory threats and legitimate ones.

It is a serious indictment of the present quality of our political discourse that almost three- quarters of all Americans were so easily led to believe that Saddam Hussein was

personally responsible for the attacks of September 11, 2001, and that so many Americans still believe that most of the hijackers on September 11 were Iraqis. And it is an indictment of the way our democracy is currently operating that more than 40 percent were so easily convinced that Iraq did in fact have nuclear weapons, even after the most important evidence presented—classified documents that depicted an attempt by Saddam Hussein's regime to purchase yellowcake uranium from the country of Niger—was revealed to have been forged.

Clearly, the current administration has misused fear to manipulate the political process, and I will return to this issue later in this chapter. But I think a far more important question is: How could our nation have become so uncharacteristically vulnerable to such an effective use of fear to manipulate our politics?

A free press is supposed to function as our democracy's immune system against such gross errors of fact and understanding. As Thomas Jefferson once said, "Error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it." So what happened? Why does our immune system no longer operate as it once did? For one thing, there's been a dramatic change in the nature of what philosopher JŸrgen Habermas has described as "the structure of the public forum." As I described in the introduction, the public sphere is simply no longer as open to the vigorous and free exchange of ideas from individuals as it was when America was founded.

When errors of fact and judgment are no longer caught and neutralized by the nation's immune system, it is time to examine the problem and to work toward good health in our political discourse. In order to do this, we need to start paying more attention to new discoveries about the way fear affects the thinking process. And, in fact, recent advances in neuroscience offer new and interesting insights into the nature of fear.

For most of the last century, the human brain was studied almost exclusively in the context of accidents and unusual head injuries. Doctors would note the part of the brain taken out by the injury and then, after careful observation of strange behaviors, would slowly determine what functions had been controlled by the injured part. But now scientists are able to observe healthy brains in normal operation, measuring current, blood flow, and chemical activity that indicate which part of the brain is most active at a particular time.

New technologies in any field can have a revolutionizing impact. When Galileo used new and more powerful telescopes to study the heavens in greater detail, he was able to see the movements of the planets around the sun and the movements of Jupiter's moons around Jupiter in order to describe in compelling detail the comprehensive new model of the solar system first proposed by Copernicus. It was the new technology itself that empowered Galileo to describe a reality that was impossible to perceive so clearly until the new technology of the telescope made it possible.

In almost exactly the same way, the new technology called "functional magnetic resonance imaging," or FMRI, has revolutionized the ability of neuroscientists to look

inside the operations of a living human brain and observe which regions of the brain are being used at which times and in response to which stimuli. Just as Galileo could suddenly see the moons of Jupiter, neuroscientists are now able for the first time to see the proper relationships among areas of the brain such as the amygdala and the hippocampus and the neocortex, to name only a few. An entirely new understanding of the brain is coming forth, and one of the areas that has been richest in discoveries has to do with how we as human beings function in relation to fear. The implications for democracy are profound.

In a democracy, the common (if usually unstated) assumption is that citizens operate as rational human beings, reasoning their way through the problems presented to them as if every question could be analyzed rationally and debated fairly until there is a well-reasoned collective conclusion. But the new research demonstrates that, of course, this is not the way it works at all. One of the world's leading neuroscientists, Dr. Vilayanur S. Ramachandran, has written, "Our mental life is governed mainly by a cauldron of emotions, motives and desires which we are barely conscious of, and what we call our conscious life is usually an elaborate post hoc rationalization of things we really do for other reasons."

There are other mental structures that govern feelings and emotions, and these structures have a greater impact on decision making than logic and reason. Moreover, emotions have much more power to affect reason than reason does to affect emotions—particularly the emotion of fear.

A scientist at Stony Brook University, Charles Taber, went so far as to say, "The Enlightenment model of dispassionate reason as the duty of citizenship is empirically bankrupt."

In the words of New York University neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux, author of The Emotional Brain, "Connections from the emotional systems to the cognitive systems are stronger than connections from the cognitive systems to the emotional systems." Our capacity for fear is "hardwired" in the brain as an ancient strategy that gives us the ability to respond instantly when survival may be at stake. But fear is not the only arousing emotion that is "hardwired" to quickly activate responses. The amygdala, for example, is almost certainly involved in speeding other responses important to our species's survival, such as the urge to reproduce. (It may be partly for that reason that sexual titillation along with fear is also a staple ingredient of modern television programming.) By contrast, reason is centered in parts of the brain that have most recently evolved and depends upon more subtle processes that give us the ability to discern the emergence of threats before they become immediate and to distinguish between legitimate threats and illusory ones.

Neurologists and brain researchers describe how disturbing images go straight to a part of the brain that is not mediated by language or reasoned analysis. There are actually two parallel pathways from the visual centers to the rest of the brain, and one of them serves as a crude but instantaneous warning system. (Evolution often forces a tradeoff between speed and accuracy.) Moreover, whatever the cause of the fear, the phenomenon itself is

difficult to turn off once it's turned on.

Psychologists have studied the way we make decisions in the presence of great uncertainty and have found that we develop shortcuts—called "heuristics"—to help us make important choices. And one of the most important shortcuts that we use is called "the affect heuristic." We often make snap judgments based principally on our emotional reactions rather than considering all options rationally and making choices carefully.

This shortcut is actually a useful trait. It allows us to make quicker decisions, and it helps us avoid dangerous situations. However, our use of emotions to make decisions can also cloud judgment. When an emotional reaction like fear is especially strong, it can completely overwhelm our reasoning process.

Moreover, just as fear can interfere with reason in the presence of an imminent threat, it can also exercise the same power over reason in the realms of memory. We mistakenly assume that memory is the exclusive province of reason, but in fact those regions of the brain that give us our capacity for fear have their own memory circuits. Over the course of our lives, we emotionally tag traumatic experiences as memories that are especially accessible to recall—either consciously or unconsciously—and they are constantly being retrieved to guide us in new situations, especially when a rapid response is required.

Most of us are familiar with the phenomenon of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is common to rape victims, child abuse victims, and combat veterans, among others. Normally, when an experience is translated into memory, it's given a sort of "time tag," a mechanism that gives us the ability when we recall those experiences to sense how long ago the events we recall occurred and a rough understanding of their temporal sequence. You can sense that the remembered experience was before this and after that. Or that it was ten weeks ago or eleven weeks ago.

However, when traumatic events—those involving anxiety or pain—are stored in memory, the process is different. All bets are off. The amygdala is activated, and that memory is coded and stored differently. In effect, the "time tag" is removed—so that when the traumatic experiences are later recalled, they feel "present." And the memory has the ability to activate the fear response in the present moment—even though the trauma being remembered was a long time ago—because the intensity of the memory causes part of the brain to react as if the trauma were happening again right now. PTSD is the constant intrusion into the mind of traumatic memories and a reexperiencing of the events as if the event had just happened. As Dr. Ramachandran has pointed out, it is this preoccupation with the trauma that can be so disabling.

Even if we know intellectually that the events were long ago, the specialized and robust memory circuits in the fear centers of the brain reexperience the traumatic events when they are remembered and drive the same kinds of responses—such as a faster heartbeat and increased feelings of fear—that would be driven if the experiences were actually occurring at the time.

Structural similarities between previous experiences and subsequent ones can cause the fear centers of the brain to pull memories forward and force them into the present moment. If a subsequent experience is even superficially similar to a traumatic memory, it can wield incredible power over emotions and can trigger the same fear responses evoked by the original trauma. Moreover, reasoned analysis of the superficial nature of these structural similarities has very little influence over the fear center of the brain and seldom dissipates the power of the fearful memory. Yet the fear center has incredible influence over the reasoning process and also over the way memories are shaped. As UCLA research psychologist Dr. Michael Fanselow describes, "The available evidence suggests the amygdala learns and stores information about fear- arousing events but also modulates storage of other types of information in different brain regions" (emphasis added).

When human beings developed a higher order of thinking, we gained an advantage in being able to anticipate emerging threats. We gained the ability to conceptualize threats instead of just perceiving them. But we also gained the ability to conceptualize imaginary threats. And when groups of people are persuaded to conceptualize these imaginary threats, they can activate the fear response as powerfully as would real threats.

This ability to conceive of something that activates the amygdala and starts the fear response is particularly significant because of another important and closely related phenomenon, called "vicarious traumatization." If someone, such as a family member or an individual with whom we identify has experienced trauma, that person's feelings can be communicated to us even though we didn't directly experience the traumatic event.

Recent research proves that the telling of traumatic stories to those who feel linked by identity to the victims of trauma—whether the shared identity is ethnic, religious, historical, cultural, linguistic, tribal, or nationalistic—can actually produce emotional and physical responses in the listener similar to those experienced by the victims.

Indeed, physiologists have recently discovered a new class of neurons, called "mirror neurons," that create a powerful physical capacity for empathy. Dr. Ramachandran described the startling significance of this new finding to me:

It has long been known that neurons in this region (a part of the brain called the anterior cingulate that receives a major input from the amygdala) fire when you poke the patient to cause pain—so they were called "pain sensing neurons" on the assumption that they alert the organism to potential danger— leading to avoidance. But researchers in Toronto found that in human patients some of these cells responded not only when the patient himself was poked with a needle—as expected—but also fired equally when the patient watched another patient being poked. These neurons (mirror neurons) were dissolving the barrier between the "self" and others—showing that our brains are actually "wired up" for empathy and compassion. Notice that one isn't being metaphorical in saying this; the neurons in question simply can't tell if you or the other person is being poked. It's as if the mirror neurons were doing a virtual reality simulation of what's going on in the other person's brain—thereby almost "feeling" the other's pain. (I call them Dalai Lama cells.)

Therapists first discovered the powerful phenomenon of vicarious traumatization well before the discovery of the mirror neurons that explain how it works. Dr. I. Lisa McCann and Dr. Laurie Ann Pearlman offer the original definition of vicarious traumatization as "the enduring psychological consequences for therapists of exposure to the traumatic experience of victim clients. Persons who work with victims may experience profound psychological effects, effects that can be disruptive and painful for the helper and persist for months or years after work with traumatized persons."

Throughout the world, stories about past traumas and tragedies are passed down from one generation to the next. Long before television added new punch and power to the ability of storytellers to elicit emotional responses, vivid verbal descriptions of traumas physically suffered by others evoked extremely powerful reactions—even centuries after the original traumas occurred.

In the early summer of 2001, Tipper and I went to Greece. While we were there, the pope made a historic visit to Greece, and was met with thousands of angry demonstrators holding signs, yelling epithets. I looked into what was going on. They were angry about something that had happened eight hundred years ago: The Fourth Crusade had stopped off in Constantinople, sacked the city, and weakened it for the later overthrow by the Turks. And they're angry today, eight hundred years later.

To take a second example, Slobodan Milos?evic«, in the early summer of 1989, went to the plains of Kosovo on the six-hundredth anniversary of the battle that defeated the Serbian Empire in its heyday. Government spokesmen said a million and a half people came. Western estimates said a million people came, covering the hillsides to listen to him speak. In his speech, Milos?evic« revivified the battle of six hundred years earlier. And in the immediate aftermath of that collective retraumatization, a brutal campaign of violent expulsion began against the Croats and the Bosnians and the Kosovars at least in part because there was a vicarious experience of a trauma six centuries earlier that activated in the physical bodies of the individuals present, in this generation a response as if they were reliving that fear of so long ago.

If you look at the conflicts on the Indian subcontinent, in Sri Lanka, in Africa, in Northern Ireland, in the Middle East—indeed, in almost every conflict zone in the entire world—you will find an element of amygdala politics based on vicarious traumatization, feeding off memories of past tragedies. In each case, there is a political process that attempts to solve these conflicts through reasoned discourse. But such a response is insufficient to dissipate the continuing power of the reawakened and revivified traumatic memories. We need new mechanisms, like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa—or mechanisms not yet invented—to deal with the role of collective vicarious traumatic memory in driving long-running conflicts.

The principal way we now tell stories in our culture is over television. As I noted, forty years have passed since the majority of Americans adopted television as their primary source of information. As we've seen, its dominance has become so extensive that the

average American spends two-thirds of his or her "discretionary time" (time other than working, sleeping, and commuting) watching television. And virtually all significant political communication now takes place within the confines of flickering thirty-second television advertisements.

Research shows that television can produce "vicarious traumatization" for millions. Survey findings after the attacks of September 11 showed that people who had frequently watched television exhibited more symptoms of traumatization than less frequent TV viewers. One analyst of this study said of respondents describing their reactions to 9/11, "Those who watched the most television reported the most stress."

The physical effects of watching trauma on television—the rise in blood pressure and heart rate—are the same as if an individual has actually experienced the traumatic event directly. Moreover, it has been documented that television can create false memories that are just as powerful as normal memories. When recalled, television-created memories have the same control over the emotional system as do real memories.

And the consequences are predictable. People who watch television news routinely have the impression that the cities where they live are far more dangerous than they really are. Researchers have also found that even when statistics measuring specific crimes actually show steady decreases, the measured fear of those same crimes goes up as television portrayal of those crimes goes up. And the portrayal of crime often increases because consultants for television station owners have advised their clients that viewership increases when violent crime leads newscasts. This phenomenon has reshaped local television news.

Many of the national morning programs now lead with crime and murders, and we'll watch them for hours because they are so compelling. The visual imagery on television can activate parts of the brain involved in emotions in a way that reading about the same event cannot. Television's ability to evoke the fear response is especially significant because Americans spend so much of their lives watching TV. An important explanation for why we spend so much time motionless in front of the screen is that television constantly triggers the "orienting response" in our brains.

As I noted in the introduction, the purpose of the orienting response is to immediately establish in the present moment whether or not fear is appropriate by determining whether or not the sudden movement that has attracted attention is evidence of a legitimate threat. (The orienting response also serves to immediately focus attention on potential prey or on individuals of the opposite sex.) When there is a sudden movement in our field of vision, somewhere deep below the conscious brain a message is sent: LOOK! So we do. When our ancestors saw the leaves move, their emotional response was different from and more subtle than fear. The response might be described as "Red Alert! Pay attention!"

Now, television commercials and many action sequences on television routinely activate that orienting reflex once per second. And since we in this country, on average, watch

television more than four and a half hours per day, those circuits of the brain are constantly being activated. The constant and repetitive triggering of the orienting response induces a quasi-hypnotic state. It partially immobilizes viewers and creates an addiction to the constant stimulation of two areas of the brain: the amygdala and the hippocampus (part of the brain's memory and contextualizing system). It's almost as though we have a "receptor" for television in our brains.

When I was a boy growing up on our family farm in the summers, I learned how to hypnotize chickens. You hold the chicken down and then circle your finger around its head, making sure that its eyes trace your hand movement. After a sufficient number of circles, the chicken will become entranced and completely immobile. There's a lot you can do with a hypnotized chicken. You can use it as a paperweight, or you can use it as a doorstop, and either way, the chicken will sit there motionless, staring blankly. (What you can't do is use it as a football. Something about being thrown through the air seemed to wake that chicken right up.)

It turns out that the immobility response in animals is an area that has received some scholarly attention, and here is one thing the scientists have found: The immobility response is strongly influenced by fear. A fear stimulus causes the chicken's amygdala to signal the release of neurochemicals, and controlled experiments show that they make immobility much more likely. No, I'm not saying that television viewers are like hypnotized chickens. But there may be some lessons for us larger-brained humans in the experiences of barnyard hens. I remember times in my youth when I spent hours in front of a TV without noticing how much time had passed. My own experience tells me that extended television watching can be mind numbing.

That is one of the reasons why I feel so passionately about connecting the television medium to the Internet and opening it up to the creativity and talent of individuals. I believe it is extremely important to pay considerably more attention to the quality and integrity of television programming made by citizens. That is also one of the reasons I am concerned about the potential for exploitation of the television medium by those who seek to use it to manipulate public opinion in ways that bypass reason and logic.

Television's quasi-hypnotic effect is one reason that the political economy supported by the television industry is as different from the vibrant politics of America's first century as those politics were different from the feudalism that thrived on the ignorance of the masses of people in the Dark Ages.

Our systematic exposure to fear and other arousal stimuli on television can be exploited by the clever public relations specialist, advertiser, or politician. Barry Glassner, a professor of sociology

at the University of Southern California, argues that there are three techniques that together make up "fearmongering": repetition, making the irregular seem regular, and misdirection. By using these narrative tools, anyone with a loud platform can ratchet up public anxieties and fears, distorting public discourse and reason.

There are, of course, many historical examples of vivid imagery producing vicarious traumatization that has been used for positive purposes. For example, the images of civil rights protesters being threatened with snarling dogs and being brutalized with fire hoses helped mobilize ordinary Americans to become part of a broader movement for social justice. In my own experience, I have learned that visual images—pictures, graphs, cartoons, and computer models— communicate information about the climate crisis at a level deeper than words alone could convey. Similarly, the horrifying pictures that came back to us from both Vietnam and the Iraq war helped facilitate shifts in public sentiment against failing wars that needed to end.

Even though logic and reason have played more prominent roles in the medium of print, they can also be used along with images to powerful and positive effect in the television medium. In fact, visual images of suffering are significant precisely because they can help generate empathy and goodwill. The horrifying pictures from inside Abu Ghraib prison communicated the essence of the wrongdoing there far more powerfully than any words could have. Even so, when such strong feelings are manipulated, the possibility for abuse becomes considerable.

It is well documented that humans are especially fearful of threats that can be easily pictured or imagined. For example, one study found that people are willing to spend significantly more for flight insurance that covers "death by terrorism" than for flight insurance that covers "death by any cause." Now, logically, flight insurance for death by any cause would cover terrorism in addition to a number of other potential problems. But something about the buzzword terrorism creates a vivid impression that generates excessive fear.

The flight insurance example highlights another psychological phenomenon that is important to understanding how fear influences our thinking: "probability neglect." Social scientists have found that when confronted with either an enormous threat or a huge reward, people tend to focus on the magnitude of the consequence and ignore the probability.

Consider how the Bush administration has used some of the techniques identified by Professor Glassner. Repeating the same threat over and over again, misdirecting attention (from al-Qaeda to Saddam Hussein), and using vivid imagery (a "mushroom cloud over an American city").

September 11 had a profound impact on all of us. But after initially responding in an entirely appropriate way, the administration began to heighten and distort public fear of terrorism to create a political case for attacking Iraq. Despite the absence of proof, Iraq was said to be working hand in hand with al-Qaeda and to be on the verge of a nuclear weapons capability. Defeating Saddam was conflated with bringing war to the terrorists, even though it really meant diverting attention and resources from those who actually attacked us.

When the president of the United States stood before the people of this nation and invited us to "imagine" a terrorist attack with a nuclear weapon, he was referring to terrorists who actually had no connection to Iraq. But because our nation had been subjected to the horrors of 9/11, when our president said "imagine with me this new fear," it was easy enough to bypass the reasoning process that might otherwise have led people to ask, "Wait a minute, Mr. President, where's your evidence?"

Even if you believe that Iraq might have posed a threat to us, I hope you will agree that our nation would have benefited from a full and thorough debate about the wisdom of invading that country. Had we weighed the potential benefits of an invasion against the potential risks, perhaps we could have prevented some of the tragic events now unfolding there.

Terrorism relies on the stimulation of fear for political ends. Indeed, its specific goal is to distort the political reality of a nation by creating fear in the general population that is hugely disproportionate to the actual danger that the terrorists are capable of posing. Ironically, President Bush's response to the terrorist attack of September 11 was, in effect, to further distort America's political reality by creating a new fear of Iraq that was hugely disproportionate to the actual danger Iraq was capable of posing. That is one of the reasons it was so troubling to so many when in 2004 the widely respected arms expert David Kay concluded a lengthy, extensive investigation into the administration's claim that Iraq posed an enormous threat because it had weapons of mass destruction with the words We were all wrong.

As we now know, of course, there was absolutely no connection between Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. In spite of that fact, President Bush actually said to the nation at a time of greatly enhanced vulnerability to the fear of attack, "You can't distinguish between them." History will surely judge America's decision to invade and occupy a fragile and unstable nation that did not attack us and posed no threat to us as a decision that was not only tragic but absurd. Saddam Hussein was a brutal dictator, to be sure, but not one who posed an imminent danger to us. It is a decision that could have been made only at a moment in time when reason was playing a sharply diminished role in our national deliberations.

Thomas Jefferson would have recognized the linkage between absurd tragedy and the absence of reason. As he wrote to James Smith in 1822, "Man, once surrendering his reason, has no remaining guard against absurdities the most monstrous, and like a ship without rudder, is the sport of every wind."

I spoke at the Iowa Democratic Convention in the fall of 2001. Earlier in August, I had prepared a very different kind of speech. But in the aftermath of this tragedy, I proudly, with complete and total sincerity, stood before the Democrats of Iowa and said, "George W. Bush is my president, and I will follow him, as will we all, in this time of crisis." I was one of millions who felt that same sentiment and gave the president my total trust, asking him to lead us wisely and well. But he redirected the focus of America's revenge onto Iraq, a nation that had nothing whatsoever to do with September 11.

The fear campaign aimed at selling the Iraq war was timed precisely for the kickoff of the 2002 midterm election. The president's chief of staff explained the timing as a marketing decision. It was timed, Andrew Card said, for the postÐLabor Day advertising period because that's when advertising campaigns for "new products," as he referred to it, are normally launched. The implication of his metaphor was that the old product—the war against Osama bin Laden—had lost some of its pizzazz. And in the immediate run-up to the election campaign of 2002, a new product—the war against Iraq—was being launched. For everything there is a season, particularly for the politics of fear.

The president went to war verbally against terrorists in virtually every campaign speech and fund-raising dinner for his political party. It was his main political theme. Democratic candidates like Senator Max Cleland in Georgia, a triple-amputee Vietnam vet, were labeled unpatriotic for voting counter to the White House's wishes on obscure amendments to the homeland security bill.

And when Tom DeLay, the former Republican leader in the House of Representatives, was embroiled in an effort to pick up more congressional seats in Texas by forcing a highly unusual redistricting vote in the state senate, he was able to track down Democratic legislators who fled the state to prevent a quorum—and thus prevent the vote—by enlisting the help of President Bush's new Department of Homeland Security. As many as thirteen employees of the Federal Aviation Administration conducted an eight-hour search, joined by at least one FBI agent (though several other agents who were asked to help refused to do so). DeLay was admonished by the House Ethics Committee but refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing.

By locating the Democrats quickly with the technology put in place for tracking terrorists, the Republicans were able to succeed in focusing public pressure on the weakest of the senators and forced passage of their new political redistricting plan. Thanks in part to the efforts of three different federal agencies, Bush and DeLay were able to celebrate the gain of up to seven new Republican congressional seats.

This persistent effort to politicize the war in Iraq and the war against terrorism for partisan advantage is obviously harmful to the prospects for bipartisan support of the nation's security policies. By sharp contrast, consider the different approach that was taken by Prime Minister

Winston Churchill during the terrible days of October 1943 when, in the midst of World War II, he faced a controversy with the potential to divide his bipartisan coalition. He said, What holds us together is the prosecution of the war. No... man has been asked to give up his convictions. That would be indecent and improper. We are held together by something outside, which rivets our attention. The principle that we work on is, "Everything for the war, whether controversial or not, and nothing controversial that is not bona fide for the war." That is our position. We must also be careful that a pretext is not made of war needs to introduce far-reaching social or political changes by a side wind.

What Churchill warned against is exactly what the Bush administration has attempted to do, using the war against terrorism for partisan advantage and introducing far-reaching changes in social policy in order to consolidate its political power.

On many other issues as well, it is now clear that the Bush administration has resorted to the language and politics of fear in order to short-circuit debate and drive the public agenda without regard to the evidence, the facts, or the public interest. As I will discuss later in chapter 5, the administration has not hesitated to use fear of terrorism to attack measures in place for a generation to prevent a repetition of Cold War abuses of authority by the FBI and the intelligence community. Fear of terrorism has also conveniently distracted the American people from pesky domestic issues such as the economy, which was beginning to seriously worry the White House in the summer of 2002.

Rather than leading with a call to courage, this administration has chosen to lead by inciting fear. In the 2006 election campaign, Bush was even more explicit, saying that "if Democrats win, the terrorists win."

There is legitimate fear, of course, and a legitimate and responsible way to address it. But fear of death rouses us like no other. It is unconscionable to use forged documents and false arguments to generate such panic by convincing Americans that terrorists are going to detonate nuclear weapons in cities where they live.

When physical survival is connected to a conjured fear, that fear has a qualitatively different aspect. All fears should be talked about and can be talked about in a responsible way if they're real and if they're dealt with in a way that has integrity. But the intentional creation of false fears for political purposes is harmful to our democracy.

Of course, the use of fear as a political tool is not new. American history is rife with examples,"Remember the Maine" and the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution to mention only two. I personally recall the way President Richard Nixon used the fear of violent crime in the midterm elections of 1970.

It was a campaign I saw firsthand. My father, who was the bravest politician I have ever known, was slandered as unpatriotic because he opposed the Vietnam War; he was accused of being an atheist because he opposed a constitutional amendment to foster government-- sponsored prayer in the public schools.

I was in the military at the time, on my way to Vietnam as an army journalist in an engineering battalion. I was on leave the week of the election. Law and order, court-ordered busing, a campaign of fear emphasizing crime—these were the other big issues that year. It was a sleazy campaign by Nixon, one that is now regarded by political historians as a watershed, marking a sharp decline in the tone of our national discourse.

In many ways, George W. Bush reminds me more of Nixon than of any other president. Like Bush, Nixon subordinated virtually every principle to his hunger for reelection. He

instituted wage and price controls with as little regard for his conservative principles as President Bush has shown in piling up trillions of dollars of debt.

After the oil embargo of 1973, Nixon secretly threatened a military invasion of the Middle Eastern oil fields. Now Bush has actually done it, keeping his true intentions secret, as Nixon did. After he was driven from office in disgrace, Nixon confided to one of his regular interlocutors: "People react to fear, not love. They don't teach that in Sunday school, but it's true."

Speaking on national television the night before that 1970 election, Senator Ed Muskie of Maine addressed the real choice confronting the voters: "There are only two kinds of politics. They're not radical and reactionary or conservative and liberal or even Democratic and Republican. There are only the politics of fear and the politics of trust. One says you are encircled by monstrous dangers. Give us power over your freedom so we may protect you. The other says the world is a baffling and hazardous place, but it can be shaped to the will of men.

"Cast your vote," he concluded, "for trust in the ancient traditions of this home for freedom."

The next day, my father was defeated—defeated by the politics of fear. But his courage in standing for principle made me so proud and inspired me. I really felt that he had won something more important than an election. In his speech that night, he stood the old segregationist slogan on its head and defiantly promised, "The truth shall rise again." I wasn't the only person who heard that promise, nor was I the only one for whom that hope still rings loud and true.

But before such a hope can be realized, we need to understand the implications of fear's new prominence in our democracy. In the following chapter, I will explore why, in an atmosphere of constant fear, the public is more likely to discard reason and turn to leaders who demonstrate dogmatic faith in ideological viewpoints. These new demagogues don't actually offer greater security from danger, but their simplistic and frequently vitriolic beliefs and statements can provide comfort to a fearful society.

Unfortunately, the rise of these leaders serves only to exacerbate the decline of reason and further jeopardize our democracy.