

LEFT OR RIGHT: The Fear Factor

By Robert D. Kirvel

WHY I LIKE IT: Guest editor BRANT von GOBLE writes:

Of all political catchphrases—Where’s the beef? Eat the rich. It’s morning again in America—few are more frequently quoted than FDR’s the only thing we have to fear is ... fear itself.

But is this true? Is fear the nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance of Roosevelt’s description, or is it more?

The answer, obvious to anyone who has spent more than five minutes outside of the womb, is that fear is not just sometimes justified, but essential. One can thrive without hate, survive without love, and skip merrily through the days without despair. But the jaunty whistle of the fearless is a prelude to the funeral march. We need fear, but only in fair measure. Thus, the essay that follows—an essay about fear and its awesome and dreadful energy.

The author, Robert D. Kirvel, quite successfully illustrates and explains the mechanisms, the utility, the limitations, and the universality of fear and how they relate to the current state of political discourse:

The key here is to appreciate, whether Republican or Democrat, left or right, hawk or dove, red or blue—that is, regardless of identity politics—you are responding much the same way your perceived antagonist responds. You behave according to the way the human brain has functioned since cavemen huddled around fires or responded to the perception or reality of injury.

For the rabbit—an animal mentioned in the piece—threats are either imminent or non-existent: Coyotes do not plan their meals a month in advance. They do not window shop for dinner. There is something of the rabbit and the primitive in all of us. Fear amplifies instinctive longings for clan identity, well-defined community, quick solutions, and Manichaeian moral certainty. Such does not make for easy and meaningful communication with those whose worldviews differ from our own. It does not make for much in the way of insight.

It makes for tribal warfare (for us, not the rabbit).

And this problem—that of the tribes of belief and how their members and differing perspectives clash—is central to Kirvel’s essay. Even if his plea for understanding is unheeded or is heeded only by the few, it is no less worth making. A call for sensibility,

reason, and empathy stands on its own merits, regardless of effect, if only because it is a testament to the decency of the author.

A parting thought, this one by Lovecraft: The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown. The less we know, the more we fear, and the more we fear, the more difficult learning is likely to become. This contradicts neither Kirvel nor FDR. It only reinforces the point that fear is powerful, with fear built upon ignorance more powerful still. Perhaps Kirvel is right. Perhaps understanding our opponents will allow us to climb up and out of our present spiral of anxiety and hate. For this much, we can hope. For this much, we can labor with sincere intent.

There is no harm in trying. All we stand to lose is our fear of the dark. (Spacing is author's own.) Eds.

Left or Right: The Fear Factor

Americans who survived the Vietnam War era (1961–75) recall living with anxiety. Students feared the draft and dodging bullets in some foreign jungle. Parents were terrified by the prospect of losing a son. Politicians warned of the global erosion of democracy from a Communist-led domino effect. Those in the military were vilified, and some were abandoned after returning to a country that no longer felt like home. Many voters were outraged by a deceitful White House, while others deplored the depraved antics of counterculture hippies. Women, African Americans, farmworkers, and minorities charged the “system” with ongoing oppression. During those turbulent years, most people, regardless of political persuasion, believed that on many levels of experience—personally, culturally, politically, nationally—the U.S. was in serious trouble.

Approximately 80% of Americans and citizens of other nations who are alive today are too young to remember much about the Vietnam War. I thought back then I would never live through more anxious and disturbing times. I was mistaken.

On first encountering the expression “identity politics,” I didn’t know what it meant. Reflecting on the way people I know react to the news these days however, I realize many of us have become single-issue voters. Some of my social-media friends have “unfriended” one another because of political opinions, or they edit what they say. An acquaintance divorced her husband after the 2016 election because of endless arguments about politics. Aunts or uncles are no longer welcome at holiday gatherings.

Disagreements arise at the mere mention of abortion, guns, gangs, arming teachers, political correctness, black lives, blue lives, economic inequality, immigration, evolution, nuclear brinkmanship, and climate change. Of late, initiating a conversation can feel like stepping into a minefield in a land of magical thinking.

Identity politics refers to individuals making decisions according to social categories or ideologies that are often political. Examples are women supporting feminist causes and gays voting for LGBTQ rights. Two overarching and often mutually excluding identities today are liberal versus conservative, or left versus right. We constantly hear about irreconcilable differences in Washington D.C.; indeed, we can hardly escape the thunder in an era of lightning mass media, and the racket is usually about “them,” those other guys on the wrong side of an issue, and us.

I would like to propose a more unifying idea, the concept that folks on the left and right—even extreme ideologues who steadfastly adhere to some political stance—have more in common with antagonists than they might suppose. Indeed, we are all acting much the same way for a reason.

In what follows, it is relevant to clarify that my background is in physiology and psychology with a focus on the structure and function of the brain. That context is

germane (though my political opinions are not) because one interpretation of what's happening now in the U.S.—and to some extent elsewhere—centers on the human brain with its unique trick of discovering its own existence, yet sometimes ignoring pertinent information. Nothing else in the known universe can pull off such feats: self-discovery plus a voluntary disavowal of what might readily be acknowledged as fact. Put another way, the human brain is adept at conjuring distorted notions, some of which can be delusional. A more common mental departure from reality is denial, one of several defense mechanisms for rejecting what is right before our eyes. Are we all delusional then, in denial, or is something more basic going on?

Here's a peek at how the brain can sometimes work using an example—much in the news today—of Donald Trump lovers versus haters. Trump is one person, and everybody can observe what he says, does, and how he says and does it, but judgments about the man could not be more divergent. The more Donald misbehaves, in the opinion of Trump haters, the more the Donald lovers like him. How is it possible? Are people in the opposite camps even living in the same mental universe?

“I don't disagree with a single thing the President has done in office,” a female acquaintance said recently. She is a decent woman who can be counted on in times of difficulty. “What's wrong with people anyway?” she asks. “Don't they want to make America great again?”

Let's consider the statements in more detail. In what follows, I acknowledge the essay, “Trump and the American Collective Psyche,” by Thomas Singer. His is an analysis worth reading, but the content is quite technical unless a reader is familiar with psychiatric terminology. Here's a more accessible and modified analysis.

What I think the Trump supporter is really asking is not, “Don’t you want to make American great again?” Rather she is pleading, “Don’t you want *me* to feel great again?” Because I am not great right now. In fact, I feel injured and broken. I feel a loss of my sense of place in my own country. And the person you detest so much, Trump, is our best hope for a fix, my fix, because he understands my injury and says out loud what I’m feeling.

This woman’s adoration is reinforced by a hope of restoration through a single male. Criticism of Trump threatens her certainty and rapture, much like a religious individual encountering a crisis of faith and fearful of falling from grace.

Charged feelings are equally evident in the expressions of her NRA-loving mate. He likes a loud motorcycle vibrating against his loins, and it’s tempting to joke about his Harley as a phallic symbol, but the guns in his collection are more than symbolic. He loves his guns and shooting them, but why? It isn’t merely that he adores guns as adult toys or suffers from penis envy. Attack his gun, and you attack him. Protest guns in the street and you are not protesting for the safety of school children, you are not marching against the NRA in his mind; you are attacking all guns, our national gun heritage in the Land of the Free, and, in particular, his personal guns. You are attacking *him*. Deprive him of a gun—even one gun in a vast collection—and you take away his best friend, his security, and his identity. In a sense, he *is* his gun. That’s identity politics with a polarizing recoil.

My Trump- and gun-loving acquaintances are patriotic citizens, and they cheer when America wins at something, but their overriding concerns, evident on Facebook posts and in conversations, have to do with feeling aggrieved amid chaos. Job security and family income have been threatened in recent years. They feel burdened by soaring healthcare

costs while at the same time providing financial support for unemployed offspring who continue to bring into the world new mouths to feed. Accompanying the loss of personal solvency and pride and identity within a country they once knew is a sense of entitlement to better treatment. Top it off with a pandemic, and their sense of personal security takes a catastrophic hit.

A fundamental factor shaping their politics and everyday lives has to do with fear. Fear of government interference in their lives and wallets. Fear of thugs and immigrants and cheaters stealing their benefits and tax dollars. Fear of most things liberals stand for, just as progressives fear some of the very things conservatives champion. When they talk about their views on abortion or assault weapons, my acquaintances are really speaking about themselves, and they tend to overlook what they do not want to consider, as all of us do.

Thinking back to what happened to us as a nation during the Vietnam War era, I suggest parallel reactions are occurring now. The same types of emotion are being expressed by people on the right and left. I am not proposing liberals believe in the principles and solutions conservatives value, rather that the brains of liberals and conservatives are up to the same, old tricks that have been evident for millennia, and a self-defensive cloaking device in the noggin is covering its tracks.

If you're a naturalist or biologist or some other brand of scientist, and you observe the Earth being degraded, and you appreciate planetary and climate balance are essential to life as we know it, then you likely feel a sense of personal injury and urgency these days. If you're a conservative, and you picture an unborn baby being aborted, and life is sacrosanct according to your definition of life, then you feel grief or personal injury. If

you're a feminist and you hear an elected male is accused of sexual harassment or rape and brags about it, you judge the politician to be a creep to be feared. If you're an unemployed coal miner in Appalachia and you are losing your house and your kid just died from a drug overdose, what does it matter if some Arctic ice melts or freezes over, but it's comforting to hear the suggestion that melting is a hoax anyway. Job loss to globalization and automation, racial bias, downward mobility, discrimination on the basis of sex or sexual preference: it doesn't matter so much whether you identify politically as red or blue when you are hurting or overwhelmed by a sense of hopelessness. Though the triggers and details differ among individuals, you are feeling the same thing as the other guy. You are experiencing injury or helplessness. One way to counteract helplessness—though it might seem counterintuitive—is to identify with a bully, just as domestic abuse victims sometimes stand by their abusive partner in public.

Injury is scary inside our heads, and a central factor underlying most political hot topics these days is anxiety, as it was during Vietnam. It's an old saw in psychology that fear and anger are strongly linked. In physiological terms, both emotions involve arousal of the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord) in response to a threat. Accelerated heart rate and breathing, sweating, tremor, narrowed vision, and a host of other responses are triggered when the drug, adrenalin (epinephrine), activates the brain. Over the longer term, we can experience paranoia, black-and-white thinking, isolation, panic attacks, and low levels of testosterone and oxytocin. The latter is a neurotransmitter now thought to enhance pro-social feelings of empathy and trust especially towards ingroup members, but to enhance aggressive feelings toward the outgroup.

When confronted by injury or its likelihood, our brain communicates, “Wake up and watch out!” because responding to a threat is imperative to life itself. People can respond with fear or anger, which can lead to rage and hate, or fear can activate defense mechanisms that obscure the recognition of reality. Anger is also a wired-in behavior that can help mask a person’s fear. For example, anger can defend a person against feeling hurt and out of control, or against grief, and it can mask inner tension or a desire for empowerment.

If you’re a rabbit in a hay field and you’re confronted by a threat, you have few options: freeze in place, fight, or flee. Rabbits flee or freeze on the spot because they are lousy fighters. If you’re a human being facing a threat, you can opt to do nothing at all or fight or run away as well, but the most ancient parts of the human brain (called the limbic system) provide other options centering on emotion. The amygdala in particular helps to regulate fear. We can internalize the fear we feel. We can get mad. We can externalize blame and hate others, and we often do just that. A cold and clammy reaction, especially the freezing-in-place variety, is one expression of paralyzing fear. Hot anger is the fight part of the fight-or-flight response to threat, especially when a person is emotionally invested in a belief.

By suggesting that the same brain mechanisms are operating in folks on the political left and right (even though triggers for threats and external manifestations of fear and anger might be quite different), what I mean can be summarized in three steps.

1. The first step involves a cause or trigger. We feel threatened or injured or emotionally wounded about something personally meaningful. Think job loss, bankruptcy, deportation, a killer virus, or your child being shot dead in the street or in school.

2. The second step is a mechanism. The body shoots adrenalin everywhere, and by the time adrenalin and other neurotransmitters get to the brain and are experienced as emotion, a threat or injury manifests as fear or anger, which can lead to hate.

3. The third step is a solution. We seek relief from emotional injury, as we would for a physical wound. Quick relief might come through split-second decisions, or we might make premature conclusions involving black-and-white thinking unjustifiably separating what we believe to be good from bad, friend from enemy. In the end, the reaction is consolidated into a belief reinforced through selective attention. From there on, we can respond without the need to think things through.

What constitutes a threat or potential source of injury to you? The answer, much like triggers for political polarization, depends on many factors. For example, if you form opinions from watching only MSNBC or FOX news on television, your knowledge base will be quite different from that of someone who reads lots of respected and refereed science journals. If the news you watch on TV serves up threat to consolidate a particular response or reinforce paranoia, your idea of what even constitutes a threat will be shaped accordingly.

Let's take the specific case of abortion. Is abortion a threat in your opinion, equivalent to murder, or is it a basic human right? Your viewpoint depends on whether you are a devout Christian fundamentalist or a hands-off-my-body women's libber. If your philosophy or religion holds that conscious life (and susceptibility to murder) begins with conception (fertilization of egg with sperm), your idea of abortion as an assault on life would differ markedly from that of most biologists. But when, really, does the awareness associated with human life begin, and with it, the full complement of human rights? We

use words such as consciousness, awareness, and attention as if we know what they mean, but even psychologists who study the concepts for a living acknowledge the age-old and present-day difficulties inherent in understanding these complicated topics. Nevertheless, if you define your personhood and identity as championing the unborn, then your political identity is almost certainly Republican these days regardless of whether the party leader is saint or sinner, savior or bigot. You see the mercy in your stance and tend to overlook the rest. As psychologists express it, you maintain cognitive consonance or an internal consistency of thought compatible with your beliefs. A related concept is confirmation bias: looking at any new evidence as if it confirms existing views. The trouble is that only attending to what we already suspect is true means we also ignore or remain impervious to what is *objectively* true, in other words, reality.

Is a stable world climate a human right and on your mind a lot these days? Again, the answer depends on whether you are a tree hugger or lumberjack. Is Trump a fierce protector of the nation or racist scum? A white Christian fundamentalist and Muslim refugee would likely answer differently.

Given a perceived threat, where is relief to be found? For a person with progressive views, relief might come through political activism or regulation, such as protesting guns or marching for social justice. As a conservative, relief might be channeled through a leader who verbalizes the things you feel down deep inside but are not supposed to say, someone who tells you illegals are criminals and responsible for taking your job, and all those welfare cheats are robbing you blind. Relief might come from a man who jokes glaciers are not shrinking and winters are colder these days, and the whole business of global warming is fake, a leader who talks about bringing back law and order, improving

economic conditions, and restoring national glory. If you are a liberal and observe Donald Trump, what you observe is a manipulator, serial liar, science-denier, and admitted pussy grabber, and relief comes from disavowing him as your leader and maybe supporting impeachment. If you are a scientist who has dedicated a career to studying the natural world, then climate change threatens the things you care about, and relief comes from addressing global warming through prompt and science-validated action. To the scientist in you, an important part of your identity, Trump is an intellectually barren, morally bankrupt, politically toxic, and mentally ill science denier.

The key here is to appreciate, whether Republican or Democrat, left or right, hawk or dove, red or blue—that is, regardless of identity politics—you are responding much the same way your perceived antagonist responds. You behave according to the way the human brain has functioned since cavemen huddled around fires or responded to the perception or reality of injury. When you feel threatened or wounded, the injury elicits fear or anger, and what you require is relief from the cause of injury. In other words, regardless of personal or political opinions, we all respond with predictable reactions and emotions orchestrated by the brain. The difference between a person on the left or right originates from the trigger, that is, the cause of perceived injury. If you appreciate why the trigger is a spark for someone's fear or anger, you can better understand why the individual supports a position or person that brings relief even when that solution might be your own personal trigger for injury.

A friend of mine recently posted on the Internet, “I just don't get U.S. gun culture. It's totally wacko.” Indeed, gun culture appears to be bizarre if you are the kind of person who feels threatened by guns. Then the threat of injury to others or yourself from a gun

triggers anxiety, and the relief you require resides in stricter gun laws. But if you feel threatened by gangs rather than guns, or by an intrusive and untrusted government, or by an antagonist who wants to outlaw guns, then buying a bigger gun for self-defense is just the ticket to address your anxiety and quell it. In each case, the organ inside the skull is operating according to the principle of self-preservation.

Apply the same reasoning to other hot-button issues, from building a border wall to eliminating food stamps for hungry children, and what seems wacko on the surface becomes understandable. The brain is simply doing its job.

The real picture of course is far more complex than the simple model presented here. Neuropsychology is complicated: there aren't just a couple of neurotransmitters in the brain but interactions among potentially several dozen, and it isn't only the amygdala that plays a role but exquisitely complex brain circuitry involving many centers and millions of neurons. Culture and genetics matter, as do education along with recent and early-childhood experiences. A simple model of threat-derived fear and anger does not address extreme behaviors, ranging from antisocial pathology or malignant narcissism to violent expressions of hatred. Clearly, there are extremists and fools out there, but the next time your aunt or grandpa fumes about some topic in a seemingly irrational way, think about the central nervous system we all share in common and a brain that wants, above all, to be safe.

End

Reference

Singer, Thomas, M.D., “Trump and the American Collective Psyche,” in *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump*, Bandy X. Lee, M.D., M.Div., ed., St. Martin’s Press, New York, 2017.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *As a youngster struggling to make sense of a bewildering world and my place in it, I looked for explanations from obvious sources: initially from parents and religion, then teachers and books. Eventually I settled on science and it’s methodology, which features inductive and deductive reasoning, as the most likely domain from which to marshal insight or at least converge on a rational way of thinking when confronted with perplexing issues. In many respects, science works well, but how are we to understand surreal or toxic content assaulting us daily on the news and in social media? An elderly woman throws a tantrum and squats on the floor of a big-box store upon being asked to wear a facemask while shopping during a pandemic. Politicians and police officers, scholars and ordinary citizens, among others, are at once lauded, screamed at, or otherwise reviled for expressing a given viewpoint or responding to a situation. On a personal level, this essay is motivated by seemingly irreconcilable expressed beliefs among members of my extended family and larger circle of acquaintances. More than ever, I consider science and critical thinking to be our best strategies today for guidance even when—perhaps especially when—times are unsettling. This essay invokes a potentially unifying hypothesis derived from behavioral science; namely, despite real differences, people are far more alike than dissimilar in the way they react to unsettling or threatening events, and one common thread is a biologically adaptive coping response to fear. The promise in recognizing common ground is that despite individual social triggers and opposing political aims, we all respond to fear in much the same way, and with such recognition we might begin to transcend some divisive grievances.*

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