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The Politics of Fear

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Napoleon understood the power fear exercises over our decisions. Fear is a forceful motivator, one that can inspire us to bravery, cruelty, or naked self-preservation. Fear is unavoidably connected to the human condition, so it is universal, an experience to which we can all relate. Napoleon knew this and used it to his advantage. He functioned like a dictator for much of his rule over an aggressive France, but this use of fear, as a political tool, is not limited to obviously tyrannical governments.

In other words, fearmongering by political leaders, and the cowering subjects whom they often so easily manipulate, is as universal as fear itself.

**Power From Prejudice**

A demagogue is a leader who gains power by making emotional appeals, often based on prejudices. Like most countries, America has had its share of demagogues, and given our history, much of the demagoguery revolved around race. Southern politicians,
like “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman, Eugene Talmadge, and George Wallace, used racial rhetoric to both stir up animosity toward African-Americans and to consolidate their own power in their respective states (South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama).

Demagoguery transcends race, though, and with clever tongues, American leaders often arouse disdain for the rich, conservatives, liberals, welfare recipients, and even Christians. In essence, demagoguery seeks to turn a majority against a minority, and the more mysterious or unknown the minority, the more nefarious they become. It is a politicization of our fear of, or hatred for, “the other.” Recently, our demagoguery has revolved more around economics. During our recent debt ceiling crisis, President Obama used a rare press conference to argue that the difference between his plan and the Republican plan was really a choice between funding programs for children or for tax breaks for corporate jet owners. Republicans are also not immune to economic demagoguery. During the GOP nomination battle, Governor Rick Perry (Texas) and former Speaker Newt Gingrich (Georgia) assailed Mitt Romney’s (Massachusetts) past as a venture capitalist calling him a “vulture capitalist” to arouse resentment and hatred of Romney’s business success. This is not serious policy making, but it is instead class-based, economic demagoguery, which uses our fears and animosities for political gain.

Sacrifice for Safety

While demagogues rely on prejudice and ignorance to gain power, other political leaders create anxiety within the population by envisioning a bleak future, one where chaos reigns or where physical harm is around every conceivable corner. This approach plays upon our fear of an uncertain future, one that might threaten our financial security or our physical safety. Since 9/11, our government, led by both political parties, has used our fears for our personal safety to restrict our rights and liberties. Previously unheard of invasions of personal privacy are now routinely justified simply to protect us from terrorists. While we have all heard stories of grandmothers being humiliated during preflight security checks, we have also gladly cooperated as uniformed agents X-ray us and pat us down. We have learned to passively watch as complete strangers rifle through our most personal belongings, even after they have been run through sophisticated detection equipment. Due to national security concerns, government routinely surveils us and our vehicles, monitors our cellphones, and searches and seizes our electronic communication without probable cause. Our fear for our own safety has forced us to humbly sit by as government’s reach into our lives continues to lengthen and strengthen.

The general response I hear, when raising these issues with students and others, is, “Well, if you aren’t breaking the law, you don’t have anything to worry about.” We are, indeed, a bit different from Patrick Henry, who, when confronted with an invasion of his economic liberties (“no taxation without representation”), bellowed, “Give me liberty, or give me death!” Our generation’s glib response to governmental encroachments...
that would have made Samuel Adams pick up a musket is more along the lines of, “Whatever, just as long as I can make my flight and check out the new episode of *Glee* on my smartphone.”

**Fear Over Finances**

Beyond physical safety, our fear of the economic future is perhaps even more potent. America’s economy has been stagnant, at best, for the better part of the past four years. Our unemployment rate has hovered between eight and 10 percent since the beginning of 2009, and real estate values have not yet rebounded to their precrash levels. The Dow Jones industrial average has risen and fallen like rolling terrain, and some of Europe’s economies (Greece, Italy, and Spain) may be on the brink of total collapse. Exacerbating the crisis, America’s government continues to spend money we simply do not have. If you go to usdebtclock.org, you will see a running tally of America’s national debt, which is the amount we owe, as a nation, to our various creditors. As of this writing, the clock is just over $15 trillion. How much is $15 trillion? In $1 bills, it would wrap around the earth’s equator 58,000 times. This debt has increased dramatically in a short period — almost 50 percent since 2008. In short, times are bad.

This economic crisis has had two impacts. First, it was used to justify the massive spending just noted. Both President Bush (in the form of TARP) and President Obama (with his first stimulus effort), and Republicans and Democrats in Congress, were afraid to do nothing. President Bush was fearful that anything short of a full bailout of our banking system would be catastrophic. President Obama believed that additional stimulus was necessary to avoid increased unemployment. For the most part, members of Congress went along with these arguments due to their own fears of losing future elections. Simple, basic fear caused all of Washington, D.C., to spend, spend, and spend in 2008 and 2009.

Second, and currently, the economic crisis, and the rampant spending that followed, has provided Republicans with the opportunity to attack President Obama and the Democrats. While there is room for valid criticism, Republicans and conservatives have begun to stoke the citizenry’s fear of the economic future for their own gain. In an amusing, and not necessarily representative, example, Mark Steyn, the gifted pundit, recently compared the American political economy to the famed *Titanic*. He noted, “the *USS Spendaholic* is a rusting hulk encrusted
with barnacles; there are no lifeboats, and the ship’s officers are locked in a debate about whether to use a thimble or an eggcup.”

**Perspective From the Past**

Remember, however, that Republicans stand to benefit from a population that is terrified when looking to the future. For them, this is good politics, as it weakens President Obama and the Democrats for the 2012 election cycle. Our challenge, as citizens, is to pick through the rhetoric to find reasonable and responsible policy proposals to support, while refusing to be driven by our collective fears for what the future might bring. Fear has a strong tendency to cloud our thinking, and it makes easy, simple solutions (“9-9-9,” anyone?) more attractive. Our current situation, which is indeed serious, calls for sober reason, which is often the opposite of emotional simplicity.

Perspective should assuage some of our fears. While not minimizing the gravity of our situation, we must remember that, historically speaking, this economic crisis is not terribly different, and possibly much less severe, than past economic downturns. Between 1929 and 1933, the American economy plummeted into the Great Depression. Wages declined by 21 percent and investment by 84 percent. At the same time, unemployment went from 3 percent to 25 percent — a staggering figure considering so many households were built around a single income.

Again, there is no question that this economy has damaged many Americans, including some reading this *Torch*. Moreover, the amount and scale of our current government spending, and the entitlement culture that has driven so much of it, differentiates this current crisis and, perhaps, makes the choices that now confront us more meaningful and grave. Nevertheless, where there is perspective, there is hope.

**Hope From Heaven**

Our greatest hope does not rest with governments and the futures they attempt to create. Our hope, politically, and in every other way, rests in the realization that our God is sovereign and that He has promised to care for us. He numbers the hairs on our head, clothes the lilies of the field, and feeds the birds. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills, and His resources and love know no ends.

Though God’s provision may not always match our vision, He has promised to provide what we require, even if we are unsure of what that is. This hope should extinguish our unreasonable fears and should provide us with God’s eternal perspective, which is our ultimate comfort.

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