Fear: The Foundation of Every Government's Power

By Robert Higgs

MAY 17, 2005

44 Shares
LEELO EN ESPAÑOL

> [S]ince love and fear can hardly exist together, if we must choose between them, it is far safer to be feared than loved.
> —Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 1513

All animals experience fear—human beings, perhaps, most of all. Any animal incapable of fear would have been hard pressed to survive, regardless of its size, speed, or other attributes. Fear alerts us to dangers that threaten our well-being and sometimes our very lives. Sensing fear, we respond by running away, by hiding, or by preparing to ward off the danger.

To disregard fear is to place ourselves in possibly mortal jeopardy. Even the man who acts heroically on the battlefield, if he is honest, admits that he is scared. To tell people not to be afraid is to give them advice that they cannot take. Our evolved physiological makeup disposes us to fear all sorts of actual and potential threats, even those that exist only in our imagination.

The people who have the effrontery to rule us, who call themselves our government, understand this basic fact of human nature. They exploit it, and they cultivate it. Whether they compose a warfare state or a welfare state, they depend on it to secure popular submission, compliance with official dictates, and, on some occasions, affirmative cooperation with the state's enterprises and adventures. Without popular fear, no government could endure more than twenty-four hours. David Hume taught that all government rests on public opinion, but that opinion, I maintain, is not the bedrock of government. Public opinion itself rests on something deeper: fear.[1]

The Natural History of Fear

Thousands of years ago, when the first governments were fastening themselves on people, they relied primarily on warfare and conquest. As Henry Hazlitt ([1976] 1994) observes,

> There may have been somewhere, as a few eighteenth-century philosophers dreamed, a group of peaceful men who got together one evening after work and drew up a Social Contract to form the state. But nobody has been able to find an actual record of it. Practically all the governments whose origins are historically established were the result of conquest—of one tribe by another, one city by another, one people by another. Of course there have been constitutional conventions, but they merely changed the working rules of governments already in being.

Losers who were not slain in the conquest itself had to endure the consequent rape and pillage and in the longer term to acquiesce in the continuing payment of tribute to the insistent rulers—the *stationary bandits*, as Mancur Olson (2000, 6-9) aptly calls them. Subjugated people, for good reason, feared for their lives. Offered the choice of losing their wealth or losing their lives, they tended to choose the sacrifice of their wealth. Hence arose taxation, variously rendered in goods, services, or money (Nock [1935] 1973, 19-22; Nock relies on and credits the pioneering historical research of Ludwig Gumplowicz and Franz Oppenheimer).

Conquered people, however, naturally resent their imposed government and the taxation and other insults that it foists on them. Such resentful people easily become restive; should a promising opportunity to throw off the oppressor's dominion present itself, they may seize it. Even if they mount no rebellion or overt resistance, however, they quietly strive to avoid their rulers' exactions and to sabotage their rulers' apparatus of government. As Machiavelli observes, the conqueror "who does not manage this matter well, will soon lose whatever he has gained, and while he retains it will find in it endless troubles and annoyances" ([1513] 1992, 5). For the stationary bandits, force alone proves a very costly resource for keeping people in the mood to generate a substantial, steady stream of tribute.

Sooner or later, therefore, every government augments the power of its sword with the power of its priesthood, forging an iron union of throne and altar. In olden times, not uncommonly, the rulers were themselves declared to be gods—the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt made this claim for many centuries. Now the subjects can be brought to fear not only the ruler's superior force, but also his supernatural powers. Moreover, if people believe in an afterlife, where the pain and sorrows of this life may be sloughed off, the priests hold a privileged position in prescribing the sort of behavior in the here and now that best serves one's interest in securing a blessed situation in the life to come. Referring to the Catholic Church of his own day, Machiavelli takes note of "the spiritual power which of itself confers so mighty an authority" ([1513] 1992, 7), and he heaps praise on Ferdinand of Aragon, who, "always covering himself with the cloak of religion, … had recourse to what may be called *pious cruelty*" (59, emphasis in original).[2] Naturally, the warriors and the priests, if not one and the same, almost invariably come to be cooperating parties in the apparatus of rule. In medieval Europe, for example, a baron's younger brother might look forward to becoming a bishop.

Thus, the warrior element of government puts the people in fear for their lives, and the priestly element puts them in fear for their eternal souls. These two fears compose a powerful compound—sufficient to prop up governments everywhere on earth for several millennia.

Over the ages, governments refined their appeals to popular fears, fostering an ideology that emphasizes the people's vulnerability to a variety of internal and external dangers from which the governors—of all people!—are said to be their protectors. Government, it is claimed, protects the populace from external attackers and from internal disorder, both of which are portrayed as ever-present threats. Sometimes the government, as if seeking to fortify the mythology with grains of truth, *does* protect people in this fashion—even the shepherd protects his sheep, but he does so to serve his own interest, not theirs, and when the time comes, he will shear or slaughter them as his interest dictates.[3] When the government fails to protect the people as promised, it always has a good excuse, often blaming some element of the population—scapegoats such as traders, money lenders, and unpopular ethnic or religious minorities. "[N]o prince," Machiavelli assures us, "was ever at a loss for plausible reasons to cloak a breach of faith" ([1513] 1992, 46).

The religious grounds for submission to the ruler-gods gradually transmogrified into notions of nationalism and popular duty, culminating eventually in the curious idea that under a democratic system of government, the people themselves *are* the government, and hence whatever it requires them to do, they are really doing for themselves—as Woodrow Wilson had the cheek to declare when he proclaimed military conscription backed by severe criminal sanctions in 1917, "it is in no sense a conscription of the unwilling: it is, rather, selection from a nation which has volunteered in mass" (qtd. in Palmer 1931, 216-17).

Not long after the democratic dogma had gained a firm foothold, organized coalitions emerged from the mass electorate and joined the elites in looting the public treasury, and, as a consequence, in the late nineteenth century the so-called welfare state began to take shape. From that time forward, people were told that the government can and should protect them from all sorts of workaday threats to their lives, livelihoods, and overall well-being—threats of destitution, hunger, disability, unemployment, illness, lack of income in old age, germs in the water, toxins in the food, and insults to their race, sex, ancestry, creed, and so forth. Nearly everything that the people feared, the government then stood poised to ward off. Thus did the welfare state anchor its rationale in the solid rock of fear. Governments, having exploited popular fears of violence so successfully from time immemorial (promising "national security"), had no difficulty in cementing these new stones (promising "social security") into their foundations of rule.

The Political Economy of Fear

Fear, like every other "productive" resource, is subject to the laws of production. Thus, it cannot escape the law of diminishing marginal productivity: as successive doses of fear-mongering are added to the government's "production" process, the incremental public clamor for governmental protection declines. The first time the government cries wolf, the public is frightened; the second time, less so; the third time, still less so. If the government plays the fear card too much, it overloads the public's sensibilities, and eventually people discount almost entirely the government's attempts to frighten them further.

Having been warned in the 1970s about catastrophic global cooling (see, for example, *The Cooling World* 1975), then, soon afterward, about catastrophic global warming, the populace may grow weary of heeding the government's warnings about the dire consequences of alleged global climate changes—dire unless, of course, the government takes stringent measures to bludgeon the people into doing what "must" be done to avert the predicted disaster.

Recently the former Homeland Security czar Tom Ridge revealed that other government officials had overruled him when he wanted to refrain from raising the color-coded threat level to orange, or "high" risk of terrorist attack, in response to highly unlikely threats. "You have to use that tool of communication very sparingly," Ridge astutely remarked (qtd. by Hall 2005).

Fear is a depreciating asset. As Machiavelli observes, "the temper of the multitude is fickle, and … while it is easy to persuade them of a thing, it is hard to fix them in that persuasion" ([1513 1992, 14). Unless the foretold threat eventuates, the people come to doubt its substance. The government must make up for the depreciation by investing in the maintenance, modernization, and replacement of its stock of fear capital. For example, during the Cold War, the general sense of fear of the Soviets tended to dissipate unless restored by periodic crises, many of which took the form of officially announced or leaked "gaps" between U.S. and Soviet military capabilities: troop-strength gap, bomber gap, missile gap, antimissile gap, first-strike-missile gap, defense-spending gap, thermonuclear-throw-weight gap, and so forth (Higgs 1994, 301-02).[4] Lately, a succession of official warnings about possible forms of terrorist attack on the homeland has served the same purpose: keeping the people "vigilant," which is to say, willing to pour enormous amounts of their money into the government's bottomless budgetary pits of "defense" and "homeland security" (Higgs 2003b).

This same factor helps to explain the drumbeat of fears pounded out by the mass media: besides serving their own interests in capturing an audience, they buy insurance against government punishment by playing along with whatever program of fear-mongering the government is conducting currently. Anyone who watches, say, CNN's Headline News programs can attest that a day seldom passes without some new announcement of a previously unsuspected Terrible Threat—I call it the danger du jour.

By keeping the population in a state of artificially heightened apprehension, the government-cum-media prepares the ground for planting specific measures of taxation, regulation, surveillance, reporting, and other invasions of the people's wealth, privacy, and freedoms. Left alone for a while, relieved of this ceaseless bombardment of warnings, people would soon come to understand that hardly any of the announced threats has any substance and that they can manage their own affairs quite well without the security-related regimentation and tax-extortion the government seeks to justify.

Large parts of the government and the "private" sector participate in the production and distribution of fear. (Beware: many of the people in the ostensibly private sector are in reality some sort of mercenary living ultimately at taxpayer expense. True government employment is much greater than officially reported [Light 1999; Higgs 2005a] .) Defense contractors, of course, have long devoted themselves to stoking fears of enemies big and small around the globe who allegedly seek to crush our way of life at the earliest opportunity. Boeing's often-shown TV spots, for example, assure us that the company is contributing mightily to protecting "our freedom." If you believe that, I have a shiny hunk of useless Cold War hardware to sell you. The news and entertainment media enthusiastically jump on the bandwagon of foreign-menace alarmism—anything to get the public's attention.

Consultants of every size and shape clamber onboard, too, facilitating the distribution of billions of dollars to politically favored suppliers of phoney-baloney "studies" that give rise to thick reports, the bulk of which is nothing but worthless filler restating the problem and speculating about how one might conceivably go about discovering workable solutions. All such reports agree, however, that a crisis looms and that more such studies must be made in preparation for dealing with it. Hence a kind of Say's Law of the political economy of crisis: supply (of government-funded studies) creates its own demand (for government-funded studies).

Truth be known, governments commission studies when they are content with the status quo but desire to write hefty checks to political favorites, cronies, and old associates who now purport to be "consultants." At the same time, in this way, the government demonstrates to the public that it is "doing something" to avert impending crisis X.

At every point, opportunists latch onto existing fears and strive to invent new ones to feather their own nests. Thus, public-school teachers and administrators agree that the nation faces an "education crisis." Police departments and temperance crusaders insist that the nation faces a generalized "drug crisis" or at times a specific drug crisis, such as "an epidemic of crack cocaine use." Public-health interests foster fears of "epidemics" that in reality consist not of the spread of contagious pathogens but of the lack of personal control and self-responsibility, such as the "epidemic of obesity" or the "epidemic of juvenile homicides." By means of this tactic, a host of personal peccadilloes has been medicalized and consigned to the "therapeutic state" (Nolan 1998, Szasz 2001, Higgs 1999).

In this way, people's fears that their children may become drug addicts or gun down a classmate become grist for the government's mill—a mill that may grind slowly, but at least it does so at immense expense, with each dollar falling into some fortunate recipient's pocket (a psychiatrist, a social worker, a public-health nurse, a drug-court judge; the list is almost endless). In this way and countless others, private parties become complicit in sustaining a vast government apparatus fueled by fear.

Fear Works Best in Wartime

Even absolute monarchs can get bored. The exercise of great power may become tedious and burdensome—underlings are always disturbing your serenity with questions about details; victims are always appealing for clemency, pardons, or exemptions from your rules. In wartime, however, rulers come alive. Nothing equals war as an opportunity for greatness and public acclaim, as all such leaders understand (Higgs 1997). Condemned to spend their time in high office during peacetime, they are necessarily condemned to go down in history as mediocrities at best.

Upon the outbreak of war, however, the exhilaration of the hour spreads through the entire governing apparatus. Army officers who had languished for years at the rank of captain may now anticipate becoming colonels. Bureau heads who had supervised a hundred subordinates with a budget of $1 million may look forward to overseeing a thousand with a budget of $20 million. Powerful new control agencies must be created and staffed. New facilities must be built, furnished, and operated. Politicians who had found themselves frozen in partisan gridlock can now expect that the torrent of money gushing from the public treasury will grease the wheels for putting together humongous legislative deals undreamt of in the past. Everywhere the government turns its gaze, the scene is flush with energy, power, and money. For those whose hands direct the machinery of a government at war, life has never been better.

Small wonder that John T. Flynn (1948), in writing about the teeming bureaucrats during World War II, titled his chapter "The Happiest Years of Their Lives":

> Even before the war, the country had become a bureaucrat's paradise. But with the launching of the war effort the bureaus proliferated and the bureaucrats swarmed over the land like a plague of locusts. … The place [Washington, D.C.] swarmed with little professors fresh from their $2,500-a-year jobs now stimulated by five, six and seven-thousand-dollar salaries and whole big chunks of the American economy resting in their laps. (310, 315)

Sudden bureaucratic dilation on such a scale can happen only when the nation goes to war and the public relaxes its resistance to the government's exactions. Legislators know that they can now get away with taxing people at hugely elevated rates, rationing goods, allocating raw materials, transportation services, and credit, authorizing gargantuan borrowing, drafting men, and generally exercising vastly more power than they exercised before the war.

Although people may groan and complain about the specific actions the bureaucrats take in implementing the wartime mobilization, few dare to resist overtly or even to criticize publicly the overall mobilization or the government's entry into the war—by doing so they would expose themselves not only to legal and extralegal government retribution but also to the rebuke and ostracism of their friends, neighbors, and business associates. As the conversation stopper went during World War II, "Don't you know there's a war on?" (Lingeman 1970).

Because during wartime the public fears for the nation's welfare, perhaps even for its very survival, people surrender wealth, privacy, and liberties to the government far more readily than they otherwise would. Government and its private contractors therefore have a field day. Opportunists galore join the party, each claiming to be performing some "essential war service," no matter how remote their affairs may be from contributing directly to the military program. Using popular fear to justify its predations, the government lays claim to great expanses of the economy and the society. Government taxation, borrowing, expenditure, and direct controls dilate, while individual rights shrivel into insignificance. Of what importance is one little person when the entire nation is in peril?

Finally, of course, every war ends, but each leaves legacies that persist, sometimes permanently. In the United States, the War between the States and both world wars left a multitude of such legacies (Hummel 1996, Higgs 1987, 2004). Likewise, as Corey Robin (2004, 25) writes, "one day, the war on terrorism will come to an end. All wars do. And when it does, we will find ourselves still living in fear: not of terrorism or radical Islam, but of the domestic rulers that fear has left behind." Among other things, we will find that "various security agencies operating in the interest of national security have leveraged their coercive power in ways that target dissenters posing no conceivable threat of terrorism" (189). Not by accident, "the FBI has targeted the antiwar movement in the United States for especially close scrutiny" (189).

Such targeting is scarcely a surprise, because war is, in Randolph Bourne's classic phrase, "the health of the state," and the FBI is a core agency in protecting and enhancing the U.S. government's health. Over the years, the FBI has also done much to promote fear among the American populace, most notoriously perhaps in its COINTELPRO operations during the 1960s, but in plenty of others ways, too (Linfield 1990, 59-60, 71, 99-102, 123-28, 134-39). Nor has it worked alone in these endeavors. From top to bottom, the government wants us to be afraid, needs us to be afraid, invests greatly in making us afraid.

Conclusion

Were we ever to stop being afraid of the government itself and to cast off the phoney fears it has fostered, the government would shrivel and die, and the host would disappear for the tens of millions of parasites in the United States—not to speak of the vast number of others in the rest of the world—who now feed directly and indirectly off the public's wealth and energies. On that glorious day, everyone who had been living at public expense would have to get an honest job, and the rest of us, recognizing government as the false god it has always been, could set about assuaging our remaining fears in more productive and morally defensible ways.

References

Bates, Robert H. 2001. *Prosperity and Violence: The Political Economy of Development*. New York: Norton.

Flynn, John T. 1948. The Roosevelt Myth. Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Books.

Hall, Mimi. 2005. Ridge Reveals Clashes on Alerts: Former Homeland Security Chief Debunks "Myth." *USAToday.com*. May 11. Available at http://aolsvc.news.aol.com/news/article.adp?id=20050511071809990020.

Hazlitt, Henry. [1976] 1994. Is Politics Insoluble? *The Freeman*, September.

Higgs, Robert. 1987. *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government*. New York: Oxford University Press.

———. 1994. The Cold War Economy: Opportunity Costs, Ideology, and the Politics of Crisis. *Explorations in Economic History* 31 (July): 283-312.

———. 1997. No More "Great Presidents." *The Free Market* 15 (March): 1-3.

———. 1999. We're All Sick, and Government Must Heal Us. *The Independent Review* 3 (spring): 623-27.

———. 2003a. Impending War in Iraq: George Bush's Faith-based Foreign Policy. *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 13.

———. 2003b. All War All the Time: The Battle on Terrorism Is an Excuse to Make Fighting Permanent. *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 6.

———. 2004. *Against Leviathan: Government Power and a Free Society*. Oakland, Calif.: The Independent Institute.

———. 2005a. The Ongoing Growth of Government in the Economically Advanced Countries. *Advances in Austrian Economics* 8: in press.

———. 2005b. *Resurgence of the Warfare State: The Crisis since 9/11*. Oakland, Calif.: The Independent Institute.

Hume, David. [1777] 1987. Of the First Principles of Government. In David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, rev. ed., edited and with a Foreword, Notes, and Glossary by Eugene F. Miller, 32-36. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

Hummel, Jeffrey Rogers. 1996. *Emancipating Slaves, Enslaving Free Men: A History of the American Civil War*. Chicago and La Salle, Ill.: Open Court.

Light, Paul Charles. 1999. *The True Size of Government*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

Linfield, Michael. 1990. *Freedom under Fire: U.S. Civil Liberties in Times of War*. Boston: South End Press.

Lingeman, Richard R. 1970. *Don't You Know There's a War on?* New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

Machiavelli, Niccolò. [1513] 1992. *The Prince*. New York: Dover.

Nock, Albert J. [1935] 1973. *Our Enemy, the State*. New York: Free Life Editions.

Nolan, James L. 1998. *The Therapeutic State: Justifying Government at Century's End*. New York: New York University Press.

North, Douglass C. 1981. *Structure and Change in Economic History*. New York: Norton.

———. 1990. *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———, and Robert Paul Thomas. 1973. *The Rise of the Western World: A New Economic History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Olson, Mancur. 2000. *Power and Prosperity: Outgrowing Communist and Capitalist Dictatorships*. New York: Basic.

Palmer, Frederick. 1931. *Newton D. Baker: America at War*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company.

Robin, Corey. 2004. *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Szasz, Thomas S. 2001. The Therapeutic State: The Tyranny of Pharmacracy. *The Independent Review* 5 (spring): 485-521.

The Cooling World. 1975. *Newsweek*, April 28, available from the Global Climate Coalition.

Notes

[1] Hume recognizes that the opinions that support government receive their force from "other principles," among which he includes fear, but he judges these other principles to be "the secondary, not the original principles of government" ([1777] 1987, 34). He writes: "No man would have any reason to *fear* the fury of a tyrant, if he had no authority over any but from fear" (ibid., emphasis in original). We may grant Hume's statement yet maintain that the government's authority over the *great mass* of its subjects rests fundamentally on fear. Every ideology that endows government with legitimacy requires and is infused by some kind(s) of fear. This fear need not be fear of the government itself and indeed may be fear of the danger from which the tyrant purports to protect the people.

[2] One naturally wonders whether President George W. Bush has taken a page from Ferdinand's book (see, in particular, Higgs 2003a and, for additional aspects, Higgs 2005b).

[3] Olson (2000, 9-10) describes in simple terms why the stationary bandit may find it in his interest to invest in public goods (the best examples of which are defense of the realm and "law and order") that enhance his subjects' productivity. In brief, the ruler does so when the present value of the expected additional tax revenue he will be able to collect from a more productive population exceeds the current cost of the investment that renders the people more productive. See also the interpretation advanced by Bates (2001, 56-69, 102), who argues that in western Europe the kings entered into deals with the merchants and burghers, trading mercantilist privileges and "liberties" for tax revenue, in order to dominate the chronically warring rural dynasties and thereby to pacify the countryside. Unfortunately, as Bates recognizes, the kings sought this enlarged revenue for the purpose of conducting ever-more-costly wars against other kings and against domestic opponents. Thus, their "pacification" schemes, for the most part, served the purpose of funding their fighting, leaving the net effect on overall societal well-being very much in question. Both Olson and Bates argue along lines similar to those developed by Douglass C. North in a series of books published over the past four decades; see especially North and Thomas 1973, and North 1981 and 1990.

[4] One of the most memorable and telling lines in the classic Cold War film *Dr. Strangelove* occurs as the president and his military bigwigs, facing unavoidable nuclear devastation of the earth, devise a plan to shelter a remnant of Americans for thousands of years in deep mine shafts, and General "Buck" Turgidson, still obsessed with a possible Russian advantage, declares: "Mr. President, we must not allow a mine-shaft gap!"

ROBERT HIGGS is Retired Senior Fellow in Political Economy at the Independent Institute, and Founding Editor and former Editor at Large of ***The Independent Review***, and author of numerous books including ***Crisis and Leviathan***, ***Against Leviathan***, and ***Depression, War and Cold War***.

Defense and Foreign Policy | Government and Politics | Government Power | Philosophy and Religion | Socialism, Communism, and Collectivism | Terrorism and Homeland Security

Comments

1 Comment
Login
Join the discussion…
LOG IN WITH
OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS
Name
Share
Best Newest Oldest
Nicholas=VictoryofthePeople
3 months ago
I can't recall a clearer, more succinct, useful and compelling analysis than this one. Has this article really received no comments until now? Unbelievable. Well, here's another: thank you very much indeed, Mr Robert Higgs. I don't know if you are still writing, but I'm going to find out.
0 0 Reply Share ›
Subscribe Privacy Do Not Sell My Data
DISQUS

Related Articles

OCT 16, 2026

When California Took the Lead on Civil Rights

But the Golden State has ways to restore national leadership.

READ MORE

OCT 15, 2026

Why California Can't Build Reliable and Affordable Essential Projects

A decade of court cases shows housing is CEQA's top target.

READ MORE

OCT 14, 2026

President's Guide to Purging Hispanic Heritage

A modest proposal for fixing the map.

READ MORE

Stay Connected to the Independent Institute
Sign up to receive periodic updates of the latest news, research, events, and publications.
Email Address
Subscribe
View All Options
BEYOND HOMELESS
ANTI-TARIFF DECLARATION
MY GOV COST ONLINE CALCULATOR
FDAReview.org
INDEPENDENTE

The Independent Institute
100 Swan Way
Oakland, CA 94621-1428

Phone (510) 632-1366
Fax (510) 568-6040

Copyright © 2026 Independent Institute - All Rights Reserved