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America's Crisis and the Politics of Fear

By David Altheide
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America is in crisis fueled by the politics of fear and the expansive use of social media. My research on propaganda and fear suggests that President Trump's support and actions reflect the politics of fear, or decision makers' promotion and use of audience beliefs and assumptions about danger, risk, and fear in order to achieve certain goals. The new President's executive orders have compromised cherished American values of freedom of religion, welcoming of immigrants and political refugees, respect for international organizations (e.g., U. N., NATO), and trade agreements. He proudly states his beliefs in matters that are factually incorrect, such as 3-5 million fraudulent votes in the 2016 election, the efficacy of torture, and denies the impact of human pollution on climate change. Nevertheless, he is actually fulfilling many of his pledges made in a vulgar and uncivil campaign.

There are three major contributors to our current politics of fear. First, while many voters claimed to be angry, anger is based on fear, and there have been several decades of fear promoted mainly by the entertainment oriented mass media and popular culture presenting non-stop fear about crime, violence, drugs, gangs, immigrants, and more recently, terrorism. And most of this has occurred during a time when the crime rate, especially violent crime, was declining. This still goes on; 25-40% of local TV news reports are about crime and violence. Second, the 9/11 attacks initiated an intense anti-terrorism propaganda campaign waged by the Bush and Obama administrations that expanded surveillance and heightened fear of terrorism linking it to crime, drug sales, and immigration. News reports and advertisements joined drug use with terrorism and helped shift drugs from criminal activity to unpatriotic action. A \$10 million ad campaign that included a 2002 Super Bowl commercial stated that buying and using drugs supports terrorism, or, as President Bush put it, “If you quit drugs, you join the fight against terror in America.”

The development of the internet as well as Fox News and right wing talk-radio that were devoted to more conservative positions encouraged more fear, as well as anti-Obama screeds, including the Trump led “birther movement.” The major focus was the news media. As shown in Kathleen Hall Jamiesen and Joseph N. Capella’s book, Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment, the prevailing mantra was that most institutional news organs in the United States (e.g., NBC, CBS, ABC, CNN, The New York Times), are liberal, biased, anti-Christian, and anti-American. Donald Trump’s campaign stoked fear about crime, minority groups, immigrants, Muslims, and terrorists, stressing that they threatened American safety and jobs. These became the targets of anger. The fear-based anger of the electorate was channeled through populist appeal with uncivil discourse attacking all opposition.

Social media was the third factor that channeled fear into personal feelings and perceptions. According to the Pew Research Internet Project, in 2000, about 46% of Americans had access to the internet, while over 87% did so in 2014. Cell phone usage increased from 53% to 90% during the same period. And smart phone ownership—quite rare in 2000—soared to nearly 60% in 2014. Communication became more personal, instantaneous, and visual with the development of social media, especially interactive smart phones. Individuals could focus on personal networks (e.g., Facebook) and not only share personal information, but more importantly, could share their own opinions and select information sources and content that they preferred, regardless of its veracity. Treating all facts as mere opinions promoted the development of “fake news,” or what a Trump advisor referred to recently as “alternative facts,” that appealed to the frightened voters. They voted and fear won. It usually does.