

Selling Fear and the Politics of Anxiety

President Bush is about to face some tough questions concerning the war in Iraq. The fact that the United States has been unable to locate any weapons of mass destruction has created concern for many people, including those who supported the war.

It is inappropriate to begin bashing the president, however. If there are questions about the military intelligence he used to make the case for war, those questions should be posed in an orderly and systematic way by Congress. We've just concluded one presidential witch hunt-another one now will not serve us well.

Besides, the president is not the only player in this scenario. The final decision may have been his, but we live in a democracy. Whether or not we voted for Mr. Bush, he is our president and what he does reflects directly on who we are. We share in the responsibility for whatever good or bad is done in our name and on our behalf. Alongside any congressional inquiry about the war, there needs to be a corresponding reckoning of our own motives.

Since the Sept. 11 attacks Americans have experienced varying degrees of grief, anger and fear.

We have grieved the loss of those who died in the attack. We have also grieved our loss of innocence. For a long time we were far removed from the world of terror and destruction. That moment of paradise is gone forever.

Our anger has burned with a passionate righteous indignation. We were enraged by the senseless murder of thousands of innocent people. We were outraged by the evil cunning that turned passenger planes into missiles. We have waited with clenched fists for someone to tell us where to direct our anger.

But underneath the grief and the anger has been a pervasive fear. It is this fear that keeps our anger burning. It is this fear that keeps us up at night wondering when the next attack might come.

Unfortunately, fear is never too far from the surface in the American psyche. Throughout its history, America has been exposed to a multitude of conspiracy theories about “what’s really going on.” Many believe that the world’s social systems are controlled by a few powerful individuals who belong to secret organizations that seek to rule the world. Many Christians are certain that somewhere in the world the anti-Christ has already been born and will one day rise to power.

We fear the government, we fear our neighbors, and if we were honest, we would admit we fear that the universe is a dangerous and unfriendly place. Events like 9/11 simply confirm our fears.

Clever marketers understand how to use this fear to their advantage. Books on the end of time, home security systems, drugs that keep us from growing old—we buy into all of this and more simply because we are afraid. Maybe we bought a war because of our fear.

If the president is going to answer tough questions, so should we. How did our fear play into our decision to support the war? Did we allow our fear to shut down our ability and willingness to think and reason? Did our fear tempt us away from being faithful to the truth?

Ernest Becker, noted anthropologist and philosopher, once said, “Fear of the Lord may be the beginning of wisdom, but living in fear is the beginning of all human evil.” Perhaps that is why one of most frequent phrases found in the Bible is “Fear not.”

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