



The NY Salon presents
Living in a state of fear.

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‘Predators, Terrorists, and Automobiles’ by Christopher Hayes, The Nation

If you were to draw a single conclusion from the six years it might very well be this: fear does not bring out the best in the United States of America. A paranoid empire is not a pretty sight. When there's always an imaginary ticking bomb somewhere the perverse ethics of urgency kick in: pre-emptive war, occupation, torture. And having witnessed these depravities, it's not surprising that "fear" has gotten something of a bad rap, particularly in the progressive circles in which I tend to run. We long for the time when FDR asked us to reject the emotion: "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." But that's not really true. The problem isn't so much fear per se, though it can be debilitating to the health of a democracy. It's fear of the wrong things. There are threats out there, either to the nation or its individual citizens, and if those threats are real, relatively likely, and preventable, then it seems prudent to do something about it. The problem is that so much of our fear has been misdirected over the last six years, to disastrous effect. To take but one example, we launched a massively expensive and deadly war to counter weapons of mass destruction that didn't exist, while simultaneously underfunding the existing programs to decommission the stockpiles of nuclear fuel that have now spread through the former Soviet Republics in largely unguarded facilities. All kinds of paranoid delusions have proliferated in the age of terror -- like Boston grinding to a halt because of a few infantile light-boxes -- while deadly but mundane threats like the flu go about their grim work of killing thousands of Americans with almost no notice.

It may seem absurd to try to counter fear with facts, our dark imagination with actuarial computations of risk, but it's what we do on an individual level all the time. There's a part of me that feels a plummeting terror every time I sit in a plane taking off, but I can conquer it by clinging to objective knowledge I have of the remarkable safety record of air travel in the US. Over the past ten years there have been just over a thousand fatalities on United States airplanes, out of over 100 million departures. That's 1 fatality for every 100,000 flights, and that includes the deaths on 9/11.

Psychologists have long known that human beings do a fairly poor job of judging risk: we systematically over-estimate the likelihood of rare events (plane crashes) and severely underestimate fairly routine hazards (getting nailed with luggage falling from overhead bins. Last year, an estimated 4,000 people were injured this way.) But whatever our inclinations and evolutionary disposition to misjudge the likelihood of bad things happening, all is not lost. We are able, with a certain degree of effort, to correct and recalibrate our risk assessments so that our broad societal judgments and media coverage more or less correspond to reality and not our dark imaginations. Take cigarettes, for example. When the medical profession first started raising alarm about cigarettes, there was a concerted effort by the tobacco industry to blow smoke. And for a while it worked. But with a huge amount of effort and government involvement (taxes, health warnings, restrictions on advertising), people began to more accurately assess the risk of smoking, and their behavior adjusted accordingly. A recent study found that the decline in smoking over the last three decades saved the lives of 146,000 men in the U.S. between 1991 and 2003. One hundred and forty six thousand.

The job, then of the media is to find ways to aid in that process. The problem, though, is that the entire ethos of journalism is about finding "man bites dog" stories; the bizarre, the catastrophic, and the strange will always attract copy. Nobody will pick up a newspaper with the headline "Area man dead from lung cancer." Fine. But reporters have a duty to balance their "man bites dog coverage" with some new and compelling ways of telling the stories of dogs biting men. Too often, they fail. Badly.

Take for instance the nation's current child sex abuse panic, facilitated by shameful bits of sensationalism like NBC's "To Catch a Predator" series. On election eve, last November, I was driving around Virginia Beach, where I'd gone to report on the election for the Nation. Fiddling with the radio dial, I happened upon a long involved radio promotion for an upcoming special episode of one of the local news stations. They were convening a live town hall meeting to discuss "How to protect your children from predators." There would be "experts" and parents and kids, all brought together to fight the scourge of the evil perverts who lurked around every mouse click and IM chat channel. This was immediately followed by a campaign spot for Republican Senator George Allen, in which Allen's wife testified to her husband's character and touted his legislative record, including the bills he'd passed to "stop child predators."

It occurred to me that this was a perfect feedback loop of hysteria. The media hypes an almost non-existent threat, and politicians then boldly respond with policy measures to address the non-existent threat. But since none of this is rooted in the actual frequency of victimhood or risk of victimization the entire cycle can continue building on itself regardless of whether the policies are effective or needed.

So let's take a step back from the precipice of predator-madness for a second and look at the data. Because children are reticent to report abuse, establishing rates of sexual abuse

of minors is difficult, though in the US some estimate that as many as one in five children are sexually abused at some point in their childhood. That's a startlingly high number, but the fact is that a miniscule portion of that abuse is perpetrated by strangers. One department of justice study of three states found that just 4% of rape victims under the age of 12 were victimized by strangers. Almost every other study of child sexual abuse confirms the same trend: the overwhelming majority of sexual abuse of minors is committed by perpetrators who already know the victim. Additionally, there's some evidence that the rate of sexual abuse of children has dropped precipitously. Between 1992 and 2000, the number of cases of confirmed sexual abuse reported to local state agencies went from 150,000 cases to 89,500 cases, a 40% decline. It's possible that this represents some systemic failure of the reporting mechanism, but it's also possible it means that sexual abuse rates have, in fact, gone down.

A far, far more grave threat to your child than some online sex predator lingers menacingly just outside your house nearly every waking and sleeping moment and has contact with your child multiple times a day. I speak, of course, of the family automobile, by far the most dangerous item your family owns. (Unless of course, you have a swimming pool or a gun.) While cars have grown far safer over the last several decades (thank you Mr. Ralph Nader), over 40,000 people die every year in auto accidents, and auto accidents are still the single leading cause of death of children over one year old.

Because train and plane crashes are far more spectacular and memorable, we demand a much higher level of safety in those modes of transportation and tolerate a far higher level of risk on our roads, which leads to some perverse unintended consequences. In his new book, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them*, John Mueller points out that the huge drop in air travel and concomitant increase in car travel in the wake of 9/11 likely resulted in more deaths than the passengers on the four hijacked planes.

It's hard to get our head around this idea: we can picture the planes crashing into the towers, the towers falling, the sobbing widows, but we can't call to mind those random traffic accidents along America's highways that wouldn't have happened had their drivers been safely buckled inside a 757. Mueller's point, and one that we too often ignore, is that inaccurate assessments of risk and misplaced fear have profound, even deadly, costs.

And nowhere is this more evident than in our so-called War on Terror. In his book *The One Percent Doctrine*, Ron Suskind describes a rubric that Vice President Dick Cheney devised in the first uncertain days after the 9/11 attacks to evaluate threats. If there was even a one percent chance of some massive attack, the government was to act as if it were a certainty, hence the title of the book. From an actuarial perspective, this is deranged. In computing potential risk you multiply the likelihood of an uncertain event by its potential damage to arrive at an expected cost. If you simply assume that something is certain because it is potentially very damaging or costly, you end up with, well you end up with a

\$1-2 trillion dollar war waged over weapons of mass destruction that don't exist.

"A threat that is real but likely to prove to be of limited scope has been massively, perhaps even fancifully, inflated to produce widespread and unjustified anxiety," Mueller writes. "This process has then led to wasteful, even self-parodic expenditures and policy overreactions." Consider for a moment what risks and threats that money could have been spent on: it could have off-set the possible economic disruptions that might ensue from a move towards Kyoto-style reductions in carbon emissions. It could have paid to decommission every single bit of unused nuclear fuel in the world, or for health insurance for the uninsured, or simply making sure every American has access to a flu shot in order to prevent some of the 20,000 deaths every year due to the virus. But then, it's hard to win an election (or sweeps week) waging a War on Phlegm.