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The Pros and Cons of Fearing Fear: Examples from Venezuela and New York State

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Abstract. This article describes consequences of fear for security-related public policy.

As with most pithy statements alleged to yield wisdom and demonstrated to yield multiple interpretations constructed on pre-conceived cognitive-affective schemata, there's nothing to fear but fear itself can contribute or induce policy pros and cons.

Fear can adaptively orient an individual--and larger concatenations of individuals--to matters that need attending to. While no fear and intense fear may hinder effective problem identification, analysis, and resolution--viz., three processes that are not discrete and disparate but incontrovertibly intermingled--moderate fear has been associated with increments in successful task accomplishment.

But, again, removing the experience of fear and fear as something to fear may allow more adaptive task-related efforts towards preventing and appropriately resolving a crisis. There is much to be said for this perspective, in that fear as undesired affect by general populations and as desired affect by sensation-seeking individuals, has often been shown to contaminate and deleteriously affect the cognitive complexity of decision making and of evaluating decisions that are made.

The cons of fear recently have seemed significant in two very different political phenomena. One phenomenon comprises security concerns related to the Indian Point nuclear power plant in New York State. At Issue is the assumption that fears about security are not separate from some objective security status of the power plant and from the viability of emergency plans if safety and security are significantly violated. Instead, fear may be an active and robust factor in the actual security status. Specifically, if more and more people have more and more fear about the security of the power plant and its emergency plans, then security-related policies, plans, and procedures become less and less viable and effective regardless of their respective content. And the dividing line between legitimate concerns and misguided ones becomes ever more difficult to proactively identify.

In Venezuela, the cons of fear address a different Issue--viz., the very stability of the country and the stability, legitimacy, and effectiveness of the national government. Specifically, as many affluent and middle-class individuals who constitute opposition to the national government experience intensified fear, they seem to be developing and implementing plans for meeting government threats that may be extremely unlikely. Assuming some sort of zero-sum game involving psychological functioning, one might conclude that the more attention is allocated to addressing such threats, the less is available for more significant and pressing concerns about the fate of the rule of law, macroeconomic and microeconomic status, and so on.

Fear and fearing fear can constitute prescriptions and proscriptions for public policy development, implementation, and evaluation. Whether towards New York State, Venezuela, or the myriad of more globally publicized concerns related to Iraq and North Korea, fear, fearing fear, and their infinite iterations will populate the psychological reality. The fear of national leaders to even admit of such fear further complicates political psychological efforts to support sound political process and praxis. (See

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Bartholomew, R.E., & Wessely, S. (2002). Protean nature of mass sociogenic illness: From possessed nuns to chemical and biological terrorism fears. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 180, 300-306; Dunkel, C.S. (2002). Terror management theory and identity: The effect of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on anxiety and identity change. *Identity*, 2, 281-301; Klonowicz, T. (2002). Unrealistic optimism and real life: The role of threat, neuroticism, and extraversion in unrealistic optimism. *Polish Psychological Bulletin*, 33, 27-39; Starr, C. (2001). Hypothetical fears and quantitative risk analysis. *Risk Analysis*, 21, 803-806; Thompson, G. (February 2, 2003). Neighborhood barricades in Caracas. *The New York Times*, p. 6; Wald, M. (February 3, 2003). To the nuclear fears at the Indian point Plant, add fear itself. *The New York Times*, p. 33.) (Keywords: Fear, New York, Public Policy, Venezuela.)