



Terrorism and Fear

By: Adam Garfinkle





Fear is politically fungible, able to migrate stealthily from one cause to others, and from one host to others. Fear can also pool or coalesce around shocking experiences. These gymnastic capacities are what give terrorism its social and, ultimately, its political punch.

When people express fear they typically think they know the source of what makes them afraid.

In simple, direct cases, the alignment is usually determined accurately. If, say, a large stray dog growls at you menacingly as you stroll through a park and you become afraid of the dog, you are probably right about the source of your fear.

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Where instead the case is not simple, direct or time-focused, but rather complex, abstract and temporally indistinct, with relevant information mediated rather than sensed through direct experience, aligning fear with its actual source is much harder to achieve.

That is certainly the case with the ambient social fear generated by terrorism in recent times. People who live in places where telegenic, gruesome terror has become stamped into collective consciousness (say Paris, London, or Jerusalem) are naturally more afraid that they or their friends and loved ones will become victims of the next random outrage than they were before it all began.

Many people know how to take such fears in stride, maintaining their routines, goals, and political views. But some are less stoical by temperament than others, and that goes for nations as well as individuals. This matters because terrorism does its real, long-lasting damage not by way of body counts but through the insidious undermining of the foundations of trust and normalcy that define all functional societies. Sowing disunity, the attacks infest rational deliberation with panic.

Some general living circumstances generate more basal angst than others. Those who live in broken or otherwise difficult family settings, those who face economic insecurity or think they face downward social mobility for themselves or their children, and those who live as marginal figures, immigrant or otherwise minority populations among less-than-completely-hospitable hosts, just to take three obvious examples, often live from day to day with arguably more objective ambient fear of the future than do others.

But fears tend to bundle and pool together, suddenly coalescing around vivid shocks, a bit like how water vapor coalesces around floating particles to form rain. Underlying sources of angst often go unrecognized, unarticulated, denied. Or they are merely assimilated into some layer below wide-awake consciousness. Then they can cling together, losing touch with their sources when terrorism focuses those fears on a specific cognitive gestalt: the terror attack. So people think they are afraid of terrorism, and they are; but the depth of the fear typically draws on myriad other insecurities. Already shaky people, and relatively insecure nations, tend – all else being equal – to be shaken more by terrorist atrocities than those not so shaky.

Shaky societies develop markets of a sort for fear abatement. The most effective way for political entrepreneurs to take advantage of such markets is to focus on what, or, better, who to blame for what makes people afraid. The simpler the depiction of fear's source, the better for the interests

of the would-be political hustler. No matter how varied and interactively complex the real sources of fear and insecurity may be, rattled people are easily manipulated by those offering parsimonious, emotion-driven conflation. Especially so, perhaps, in our age of technologically disintermediated individuation.

Usually, blame is affixed to society's most prominent "other". That's the history of such matters in Europe as it is everywhere else, not least during the odious second quarter of the past century, when Europe's oldest and most prominent "other" were the Jews. America's most prominent "other" has always been Africans/Negroes/Colored/Blacks, with the labels shifting over time.

Now, in a world awash with immigrants and refugees further flung than ever before, anxieties about alien ethno-linguistic and sectarian communities get mixed up with anxieties about older marginal groups, like the Roma in several European countries, to form a new, more multicultural target for illiberal scapegoating.

One way to think of this is to imagine every person and every society as having a reservoir of insecurity that can be activated by any number of experiences. A terrorist attack is one such experience. A confident, forward-looking, pragmatic person, or society, is more likely to resist reacting to news of a terror attack by pouring that reservoir into consciousness, and from there into the public space, with blame falling variously on foreign plotters and whole immigrant communities, depending on the case.

Every nation has its more or less effective coping mechanisms for dealing with danger and the fears it lets loose to roam history, and every set of mechanisms is shaped by history and culture such that some are more resilient than others. That is why terrorism and the threat of terrorism play differently in different places, and why political entrepreneurs who try to use the fear created by terrorism are more successful in some places than in others, and at some *times* rather than others in the same places.

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Here in the United States, of late Americans have developed ever-deeper reservoirs of insecurity from a range of sources, a development that sits uneasily with the relatively placid security experience of the country.

Before September 11, 2001, there had been no direct foreign military attack on the continental United States since the War of 1812. All of the nation's wars thereafter, including the Civil War, were in truth wars of choice rather than necessity, whatever people came to believe; and before Vietnam all those wars were either won or almost universally believed to have been won.

Americans thus came to feel entitled to "perfect security," which is why first defeat in Vietnam and then the terror attacks of September 11 had such high shock values. The Vietnam defeat convulsed American politics for more than a decade, adding to the river of disorientation caused by vast cultural changes inside America. September 11 resulted in near-term panic and sowed the seeds for the bureaucratized paranoia Americans have inflicted on themselves ever since.

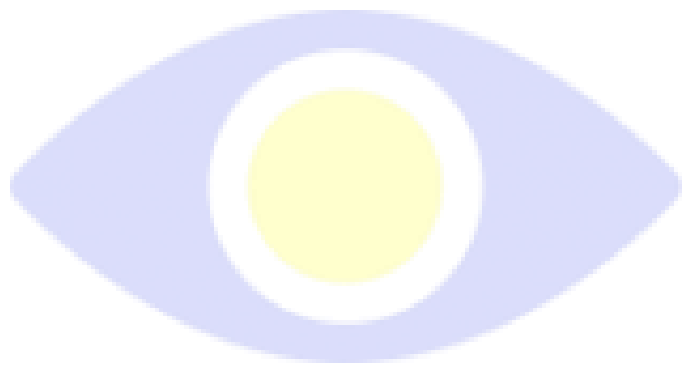
When Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously told Americans, in March 1933, that "We have nothing to fear but fear itself", it's not clear if FDR had fully diagnosed the nation's high propensity for fear, and his remark spoke to the pangs of Depression, not yet to the crucible of another World War. But it's a piece of advice that America as a nation, strong and wealthy as it is, should still take to heart.

There is, however, another factor or two at work, and how they work bears some on the character of contemporary American politics. Fear is not only fungible and prone to being bundled and evoked by catalytic events, it is also contagious and exportable. The capacity for fear to be contagious is to a large degree a media technology function. The capacity for fear to be exportable depends on the vicissitudes of political goals and character, and the extent to which people in different countries nevertheless feel civilizational kinship with people in other countries.

As to contagion, the growth and nature of social media and the internet have only made the emotional power of terrorism to undermine social foundations greater, and this is all the

more reason to double down to understand how this field works and how it is evolving.[1]

The fact



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that images and sentence fragments dominate this media, and that images and the use of words as presentational condensation symbols^[2] are far more prone to evoke emotion from the older parts of our brains than to prompt rational deliberation in the frontal cortex, is a core part of the phenomenon. That is why many years ago Yelena Bonner noted that “fear gives bad advice.”^[3]

Now just ask yourself: After a terror attack somewhere, how much of what shows up almost immediately on the media technology we have to hand tends to calm people down and reassure them, and how much of it tends to magnify and spread fear and insecurity? You don't need to be a proverbial rocket scientist to know the answer.

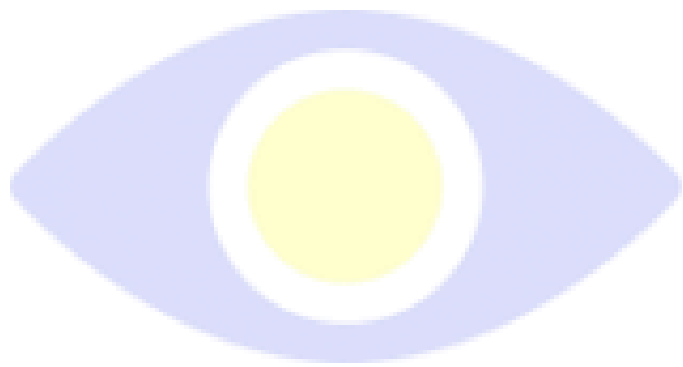
All of this is well known. It's the propensity of fear to be exported by certain kinds of political actors that has become more interesting of late. Let me get to the relevant case at hand: the attitude and behavior of the Trump Administration toward the roiled politics of immigration in Germany, Italy, and elsewhere in Europe.

The political drama playing out today in Germany, against the background of the burgeoning of immigrant-fed populism across the continent especially over the past three years, is front-page news not only in Germany. Horst Seehofer, Angela Merkel's Bavarian-born CSU-affiliated Interior Minister, is leading an effort to tighten Germany's asylum and immigration policies.

And everyone understands that immigration from Muslim-majority societies – especially from Arab countries like Syria in the current German case – is tightly associated in the public mind with the risks of importing terrorists and terrorism. Seehofer's efforts threaten to bring down the only recently patched together German governing coalition, to what political consequence no one can predict with any clarity. As of a few days ago, Merkel and Seehofer reached a kind of ceasefire in their disagreement, but no one expects it to last long or the difference of views to evaporate. And the whole world, more or less, is watching.

Some of the world is also misunderstanding what is happening, for this is no simple passion play pitting the angel Merkel against the demon Seehofer. The American elite media tend to portray Seehofer as a rightwing populist like the populists recently ascendant in Italy and Slovenia,

joining predecessors in Austria, Poland, Hungary, and elsewhere. In “look-at-the-Germans”



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terms, this portrayal is a dog whistle for “neo-Nazi” or just plain “Nazi.” Merkel, meanwhile, is invariably described as a “centrist.” This is not quite right.

As for Seehofer, he may or may not be a genuinely illiberal person, but he doesn't need to be to have taken the approach he has chosen. He hears the AfD types breathing down the CDU/CSU's neck, and he is doing more or less the same thing that the Bundeskanzler did during the recent election season – tack right – in order to coopt their popularity. Only Seehofer, being from Bavaria, is doing it more and faster, and that's too much and too fast for Merkel and most of her other ministers.

Moreover, worrying about the social disruptions of massive and sudden immigration from culturally alien places does not make ordinary people racists or bigots, even if racists and bigots are trying to capitalize on those worries. So Merkel is not usefully described as a “centrist” here. As I put it on September 12, 2015, writing from Berlin literally within days of that famous train full of Syrian migrants arriving in Munich from Budapest: “The Left's normative seizure of Germany is truly amazing. Even the Chancellor, who by German standards is far from a raving leftist, appears to firmly believe that everyone must be a multiculturalist for moral reasons, and that all people who want to preserve the ethno-linguistic integrity of their communities – whether in Germany or in Hungary, Poland, and elsewhere – are acting out of base motives.”

This was, and still is, simply untrue. As I put it then:

There is a *moral* basis, too, for a community's own sense of self-determination, which presumes the right of self-definition and self-composition. That is not racism in Europe any more than nervousness about immigrants is racism here in the United States. Wanting one's own community to be a certain way is not aggressively or actively prejudicial against others, any more than declining to give money to a beggar on a city street is morally equivalent to hitting him in the head with a crowbar. . . . It is simply preferring the constituency of a high-social trust society, from which, social science suggests, many good things come: widespread security, prosperity, and a propensity toward generosity being prominent among them. . . . [W]hat we see in Western Europe is not a case of what is moral versus what is base, but two kinds of rights, incommensurate (*à la* Isaiah Berlin) as they are, clashing.

Moreover, the German leadership's understanding of its moral obligation was at the time without qualification against contingency. It refused to limit in any way the number of asylum seekers who could be taken into Germany, or the speed with which they might come, and then it tried to "share" that perspective with other EU member states. The German approach took the deontological form of a Kantian categorical imperative, which made it easy to predict that what the Europeans were doing, under the aegis of the European Union but really at the instigation of Germany, would have "two basic political effects. First it will split the EU east and west, possibly even more bitterly than the economic woes of the past five years have split it north and south. . . . Second, it will reshape politics within most, if not all, West European countries." [4] Merkel and Seehofer, among many others, now swim in the scalding cauldron of the consequences.

What is going on now in Europe, largely as a result of the sudden and massive Muslim-heavy immigration of the past three to four years, shows that democracy cannot be abstracted into a purely civic form, totally detached from its historical national-cultural context, and still work satisfactorily. The Germans, in particular, have been reassessing their own concept of a *Leitkultur*, with most on the Left believing that the nation has transcended it. But a nation cannot jump out of its history any more than a person can jump out of his skin.

Thus, the problem facing Horst Seehofer, and Angela Merkel too, is that if decent people do not respond effectively to the real fears of real people, coalescing in substantial part around fears of future terrorism – no matter the actual conglomerated deeper sources of those fears or their inability to understand their origins – then indecent people willing to run roughshod over democratic norms will vie to lead them. And people who think that their own elites have made common cause with alien intruders at the expense of their security and identity will follow.

We know the pattern well. Confusion over disorienting change leads to multivalent, seemingly free-floating fear. That fear congeals around a particular perceived danger (in this case terrorism) and its presumed agents. Left unrelieved, fear turns to anger, and anger, when channeled by illiberal leadership, leads to disruptive political behavior, not excluding extra-parliamentary violence. And so the strategy of terrorism succeeds through irony, by evoking in a target society self-destructive reactions to the dangers it wields.

So we come to the matter of exporting fear among nations that do in fact share the same civilizational zone, more or less.

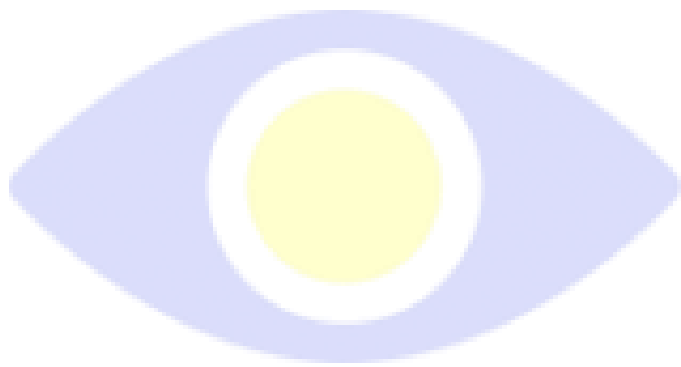
Here is what the President of the United States tweeted just the other day: “The people of Germany are turning against their leadership as migration is rocking the already tenuous Berlin coalition.” Obviously, some minor proto-fascist factotum working in the White House wrote that for Trump; it’s far too clear and elegant to be his own writing. And then he said that crime in Germany was “way up” when in fact it is mainly down, as is the rate of immigration. Did Trump know that what he claimed was inaccurate? It is impossible to say, but at least in one sense it doesn’t matter: Trump and his accomplices take an entirely instrumental attitude toward truth. Their approach is to discredit actual facts with accusations of “fake news” so that they can insert their own desired, often invented, facts. It’s a rather Soviet approach really, which, for all anyone knows, partly explains some of the President’s warm affinity for the Russian leadership.

Germany is at ground zero in a political maelstrom that echoes “terrorism” in subtle tones, but that’s hardly all there is to note. Trump has also tweeted warmly about Giuseppe Conte, the new Italian Premier: “He will do a great job—the Italian people got it right.” When earlier this month the new Italian Interior Minister turned away a ship with 600 refugees, sending it on to Valencia, Trump saw that as parallel to and supportive of his willingness (since dropped for political reasons, not reasons of conscience) to separate children from their parents in order to force through new policies that will sharply reduce immigration to the United States.

Almost no one wants to talk about it, but there was a time when separating children from their parents was fairly common, not at the border, but well within a large part of the United States itself: it was a regular feature of chattel slavery. And the kinds of people who did such things then strike me as not significantly different in basic attitude from the Trump self-clone who is now the Republican candidate for the Senate in Virginia: Corey Stewart.

And more: The new U.S. Ambassador to Germany, Richard Grenell, has said that he wants to “empower” rightwing politicians in Europe, and the common theme in the effort is of course immigration, with all the implied connections to terrorism. Obviously (I hope),

Europeans understand that when Trump exaggerates and lies about the “carnage” caused by Hispanic



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migrants to the United States who, in his telling, run rampant across the country murdering, raping, and mugging people, he is borrowing by allusion the angst created by the fear of terrorism – the 9/11 type and especially the domestic kind perpetrated by *Salafi* Muslims indoctrinated via the internet. But even the wholly homegrown sort which aims at schoolchildren, church attendees, and concert goers in Las Vegas adds to the reservoir of ambient fear. That is one reason beyond NRA lobbying that Trump will never support real gun

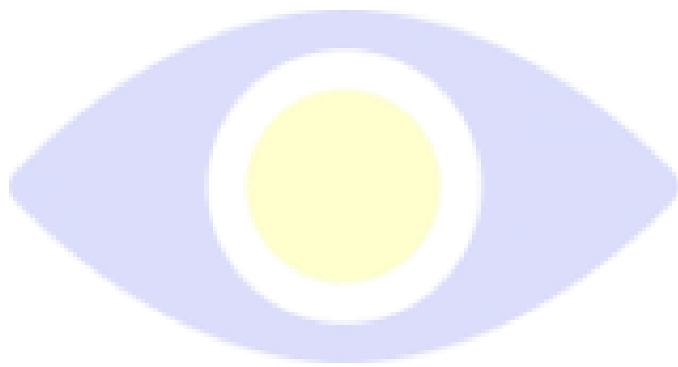
control in the United States: the gun violence that creates such intense anxiety is the raw material for his type of fear-borne political appeal, his effort to be parasitic in effect on ambient fear. Why would he want to reduce the supply of that raw material?

In short, Trump and company – not to exclude Steve Bannon, despite his not being in the Administration at present – are trying to export their anti-immigration attitudes into Europe to help likeminded illiberal political forces. They seek to undermine the European Union itself, and see splitting European opinion as starkly as possible along the immigration/terrorism seam as an excellent means to that end. Trump is trying to build another “nationalist internationale”, like that of the 1930s, and so he sees Orban, Kaczyński, Erdogan, Putin, and others as objective allies. If NATO is destroyed in the process, Trump would not regret it, because his capacity for understanding positive-sum relationships appears to be non-existent. In other words, as astonishing and hard to credit as it seems, the President of the United States and his Administration are in the main behaving toward Europe in ways indistinguishable from how one would expect the Russian leadership to behave.

None of this should be terribly surprising. During the campaign Trump was supportive of Marine Le Pen, Nigel Farage, and other such figures. (He also lied about not knowing who David Duke was, but that’s a domestic matter.) Most observers figured that this was typical campaign signaling, and that anyway the arc of his actual governing behavior, if he won, would “regress to the mean.” It seemed like it might for a while, but that is definitely not what has occurred: the opposite, as time passes, is more like it. As I put it a different context this past month, here is what Donald Trump is actually up to:

President Trump is engaged in a political insurgency designed, in effect, to bring about global regime change, despite the fact that the regime he wants to change is one of mainly

American design, construction, and maintenance. His war plan has two fronts: the attack on the so-called



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administrative and “deep” state domestically; and the attack on the institutional framework of the so-called liberal international order. So Trump may not have policies as they are conventionally understood, but he may well have a strategy of statecraft, however idiosyncratic and illiberal it may be, that combines domestic and foreign aspects into a whole. He may not know or much care what withdrawing the United States from the Iran deal will lead to in the Middle East, but he does seem to know at least in broad outline what the skein of that and related decisions, taken together, are leading to.[5]

The very same conclusion applies to the now accelerating attempt to export anti-immigrant sentiments to Europe in the post-G7 meeting context.

Let's be clear what this means: it is a U.S. government effort to export fear to Europe by supporting local forces that traffic politically in it. It aims to enlarge the scope of polarization within individual European countries as well as among them, and between Europe and Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East and North Africa as well. Trump would like nothing more than to see European countries adopt anti-Muslim travel bans like the one he eventually managed to impose in the United States.

To the extent this fear-exporting initiative succeeds, it will magnify the political and social impact of terrorism in the importing countries and it will help indecent people as opposed to decent ones to take advantage of current anxieties about the nexus between immigration and terrorism. In time it could therefore make European countries an even more appealing target for terrorists to strike at, since fearful, divided societies are far more prone to the strategy of terrorism succeeding, and if so it may well increase body counts as well.

It is painful to reach this conclusion, but it cannot be avoided: the current attitudes and behavior of the U.S. government make the European dilemma of dealing with terrorism within its borders worse, even as routine anti-terrorism cooperation, mostly having to do with intelligence sharing, will probably continue uninterrupted as applied to domains outside Europe. The downside of the former will overwhelm the benefits of the latter in due course, and if Trump ever gets around to really dismantling the “deep state” – with which he closely associates the entire U.S. intelligence

community, its foreign as well as its domestic components – that intelligence cooperation will likely end as well.

Any set of political tactics that deliberately uses fear, let alone manufactures and exports it, describe the antithesis of genuine leadership in a democratic polity. Leadership's burden is supposed to be building trust and confidence, not destroying it with divisiveness and a general meanness of spirit. It is supposed to point to a better way forward, not to grouse over what is past. Alas, it takes a special kind of coward to hate the most those whom he fears the least.

[1] See Sara Brzuszkiewicz, "Terrorspeak", *The American Interest* (July-August 2018), and the literature reviewed therein.

[2] I am combining here insights from Susanne K. Langer (presentational symbol) and Doris

Graebner (condensation symbol) for those who wish to track back the paper trail of the

idea. [3] *New York Times*, December 6, 1991.

[4] "Insane Asylum," *The American Interest*, September 12, 2015.

[5] "The Meaning of Withdrawal", *The American Interest*, May 11, 2018.

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