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Fear Those Who Control Government

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On a recent visit to Peru a journalist friend asked me, "What is going on in the United States?" It was clear he was not seeking a simple recap of the latest news. Instead he wanted me to explain the current political climate. I did not have a good answer for him.

Upon reflection, I could have described America's zeitgeist in a single word: fear. Many will say they know no fear, especially those who have never heard a shot fired in anger. Despite the machismo, in reality there are two types of fear at work -- a fear for our security in the wake of 9/11 and a fear of modernity and the change that comes with it. Both are as irrational as they are powerful, and both have been relentlessly exploited for political gain.

A threat to one's survival often provokes a "fight or flight" reflex, which together with uncertainty can inhibit rational thought. As Americans watched the collapse of the twin towers, they were shocked to realize that terrorism is not something that happens only to Americans abroad. Because terrorists don't wear uniforms and can strike anywhere, there was no clearly identifiable enemy and nowhere to run.

Unable to fight or flee, Americans turned to their political leadership who promised safety. Those leaders used fear as a blank check with which to assume any powers they deem necessary. As a result, human rights and civil liberties have become optional instead of the values that define us. The NSA's illegal monitoring, Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, rendition and enhanced interrogation techniques have all become the tools of a government that claims it exports democracy.

That hypocrisy is not lost on the rest of the world. Nor is it unique to the executive branch. Recently, Congress overwhelmingly passed a bill prohibiting the use of torture despite threats of a veto. After a compromise was supposedly worked out, the president signed the bill but issued a statement saying he would ignore the ban whenever he felt like it. Sen. John McCain's response was to post a statement on his website that said no such exemption was granted and threatened "oversight." In other words, for politicians it's all about the photo op and the substance of the law doesn't matter. That there has been no popular reaction to such duplicity only demonstrates the fearful prefer promises of security to sincerity.

The second fear has equally perverse effects. Rather than face the modern world and deal with the effects of globalization, many wish to return to a 1950s Ozzie and Harriet existence. No matter that it existed only on television, the religious opportunists are as enterprising as the political ones and promise they can recreate it. Gay rights, abortion, stem cells and evolution can all be banned outright or dealt with by faith-based facts and pseudo-science.

Economic ruin

Such fears are not unknown in Peru or the rest of Latin America. Fear of terrorism led Peruvians to embrace Alberto Fujimori for a decade even as he dismantled their democracy. In the 1970s they prompted Chile to turn to Pinochet (whose immunity for past crimes has just been rescinded) and Argentines to cry for their generals.

Today fear of globalization and the frustration of poverty have caused Bolivians to elect Evo Morales. Lacking the petrodollars to finance his fantasies as Hugo Chávez can in Venezuela, Morales will most likely lead his country to economic ruin.

In Peru, the same fears and frustration prompt a large minority to wish for Fujimori's return and others to support another term for Alan García, who is arguably the most corrupt and incompetent president Peru has known. Second in the polls and steadily gaining is Ollanta Humala, a clone of Chávez and Morales.

Franklin Roosevelt, during a much graver time than either America or Latin America now faces, is well remembered for saying: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." If he were alive today, he would add that we also have to fear those who control our government (or wish to) and believe that they have a monopoly on patriotism, and those who control them and assert that they have a monopoly on morality.

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