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RELIGION, DEMOCRACY, AND THE POLITICS OF FRIGHT Editorial Introduction

*A president once said,
"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself"
Now it seems like we're supposed to be afraid
It's patriotic and color coded
And what are we supposed to be afraid of?
Why, of being afraid
That's what terror means, doesn't it?
That's what it used to mean*

—Randy Newman, “A Few Words
In Defense of Our Country”

IN AN EDITORIAL COLUMN FROM *The New York Times* in August 2006, Frank Rich wrote that five years and two national elections after 9/11, the politics of fear had finally run its course and was no longer an effective tool in winning votes.¹ The column was written two and half months before the midterm congressional elections when the Democratic Party won back a majority in Congress. Already at that point, however, Rich was confident that “the White House’s latest effort to exploit terrorism for political gain” had ended, and with it, so too was “the era of Americans’ fearing fear itself … over.” This was an acute observation and bold prediction from Rich considering its timing just weeks after the well-publicized foiled terror plot in Great Britain, for which both the Blair and Bush administrations took full credit. “It’s not,” Rich wrote, “as if the White House didn’t pull out all the stops to milk the terror plot to further its politics of fear.” But to Rich’s mind, more important than the various photo ops, the color-coded terror alerts, the arrests of alleged terror cells in upstate New York and Miami was an administration suffering a debilitating loss of credibility. This credibility gap was partly due to the administration’s bumbling response to Katrina and its misjudgment and mishandling of the war in Iraq, which at this point was spiraling out of control and into a civil war. But in Rich’s mind, the main cause was a much simpler case of its crying wolf one too many times. It

¹ See Frank Rich, “Five Years After 9/11, Fear Finally Strikes Out,” *The New York Times* (August 20, 2006), Section 4; Column 1; 10.

would seem that the deep reservoir of fear and insecurity that had been stoked, and in some cases even artificially contrived or at least wildly disproportional, was finally exhausted, no longer capable of energizing the base and moving the electorate.² By such a reading, the Democratic Party's gains in both the House and Senate in the November elections would only serve as confirmation proving Rich's analysis correct.

But beyond the immediate ramifications for U.S. electoral politics, the strategic use-value of fear as a political tool raises a series of important issues, both practical and theoretical, for our concern. First of all, as chronicled by the political scientist and national security consultant John Mueller in his book *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them*, the political exploitation of fear since 9/11 has arguably made the U.S. less, not more, secure.³ This argument goes beyond Barry Glassner's incisive study of the American culture of fear that is stoked by a news industry beholden to the sensational to what Mueller calls "wasteful, even self-parodic expenditures and policy overreactions."⁴ For Mueller, 9/11 was a singular, one-time event that could never be repeated. Nevertheless, opportunist politicians invoke the memory of 9/11 on almost any occasion as the impetus and rationale for whatever policy is perceived as being strong and resolute, no matter how misguided or shortsighted. The primary case in point here is the rush to war in Iraq wherein the case and decision were made—without irony or apology, we should add—for a preemptive war. In hindsight, it has become increasingly evident that this war was both misguided and short-sighted by the facts that it diverted the resources and concentration from Afghanistan, where Osama bin Laden was allowed to escape and the Taliban reconstituted, and it has already led to more U.S. casualties than those who died on 9/11 (to say nothing of the tens of thousands of civilian deaths in Iraq since the U.S. invasion in 2003). Thus, in response to Rich, we might say that while it is true that the Bush administration suffered a severe setback with its plummeting poll numbers and the recent electoral defeat, the U.S.—indeed, the entire world—is not yet done with the politics of fear, because we will be dealing with the global ramifications of the decisions based in fear for at least a generation to come.

Furthermore, while it is true that the politics of fear might no longer work as a electoral trump card, it still holds a great deal of political potency in advancing and consolidating a neo-conservative agenda. For instance, consider the Military

² On this point about the disproportionate response to 9/11, see Gilbert Achcar, "The Clash of Barbarisms," in *The Monthly Review*, September 2002, <<http://www.monthlyreview.org/0902achcar.htm>>. For Achcar, the rendering of 9/11 as a unique instance of absolute evil provides an "effective and intimidate obstacle" to thinking critically and responsibly about its meaning and possible responses to it.

³ John Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them* (New York: Free Press, 2007).

⁴ Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

Commission Act of 2006: This act was written in response to the U.S. Supreme Court decision on Hamdan v. Rumsfeld, which ruled that the military commissions set up by the Bush administration to try prisoners at Guantanamo Bay "violate both the UCMJ [Uniform Code of Military Justice] and the four Geneva Conventions." The Military Commission Act effectively reinstated these military tribunals, only now with congressional authorization and cover. What was most disturbing about this act, beyond the authority it confers on the executive to selectively apply the Geneva Conventions and thus disregard international law, and beyond even its allowance for the continuation of interrogation techniques so long as they do not cause "serious mental and physical pain" and thus excuse certain instances of torture, was its provision for the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus for anyone officially declared as an "unlawful enemy combatant."

At the time of its passage, Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Arlen Specter expressed his concerns that the provision was in direct violation of the U.S. Constitution which explicitly states that the right to challenge detention "shall not be suspended" except in cases of "rebellion or invasion."⁵ Likewise, in a memorable television interview with MSNBC's Keith Olbermann on the night of the act's passage, Jonathan Turley, Professor of Constitutional Law at George Washington University, identified the moment as a national "time of shame" that "essentially revokes over two hundred years of American principles and values." Turley continued, "Congress just gave the president despotic powers and you could hear the yawn across the country as people turned to 'Dancing with the Stars.'"⁶

If that is not enough, consider also the National Security Agency's secret wiretapping program commenced by the Bush administration in the wake of 9/11: when the program was first made public and confirmed in late 2005, there was considerable public outcry and political fallout, some even calling for President Bush's impeachment. There were a number of reports and conversations investigating the extent to which the program conformed to, or was in violation of, the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978. But after a series of national polls revealed that the secret program was not entirely objectionable to the public and even helped to bolster the Republican's reputation for *realpolitik* and being tough on terror, the initial fury dissipated as the program has been allowed to proceed unabated. In the November 25, 2006 edition of *The New York Times*, for instance, a front page headline read, "Despite a Year of Ire and Angst, Little Has Changed on Wiretaps."

On the one hand, then, we have the dramatic swing in the American electorate as

⁵ See "Court Told It Lacks Power in Detainee Cases," in *The Washington Post* (October 20, 2006), A18, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/19/AR2006101901692_pf.html>.

⁶ On "Countdown with Keith Olbermann," (October 17, 2007); this interview has since been made widely available on the internet via MSNBC.com and YouTube. See <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15318240/>>.

seen in the November 2006 midterm elections indicating, at least for some, an end to the politics of fear. On the other hand, you have policies being advanced that curtail civil liberties in the name of national security. How do we explain these seeming contradictory indicators within the American political landscape? It is at this point that the distinction between the politics of fear and the politics of fright must be made. As defined by Peyman Vahabzadeh in the opening article in this special issue, the politics of fright is an outgrowth of the critical linking of a neo-conservative political agenda with a fundamentalist religiosity. As he writes, the politics of fright "intends to retrieve and salvage what is deemed as essential and foundational out of the later modern, and baffling mishmash of diversity and plurality of moral codes—prevalent in liberal democracies—that have in recent decades covered over those elemental moral codes associated with religion." "Accordingly," Vahabzadeh continues, the politics of fright "amounts to a politics against *consensus* and *public debate* and instead asserts itself through unilateralism."

In this way, the politics of fright represents a self-contradiction for liberal democracies, and more broadly, a crisis within modern liberalism. Fear stands to fright as an illness to the disease infecting our contemporary politics. Thus, while the effectiveness of a politics of fear as a campaign strategy might ebb and flow, the politics of fright is proving itself part and parcel of the "state of exception" that those such as Giorgio Agamben have identified as the "dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics."⁷ As Agamben writes, the state of exception functions as a totalitarian threat *immanent* to modern liberal democracies, which "allows for the elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system." Far from being exceptional or extraordinary, Agamben asserts that the state of exception has in fact "become of the essential practices of contemporary states, including so-called democratic ones."⁸ The state of exception is not a law per se; rather, it "it defines law's threshold or limit concept," elsewhere described as a "no-man's land between public law and political fact," or as a "zone of indifference" and a "threshold of undecidability."⁹ (For a fuller discussion of Agamben's analysis of the state of exception in relation to the politics of fright, see William Little's essay in this issue, "The Return of the Sacred Man: Politics, Fundamentalism, and Fright.")

Agamben's analysis is drawn from the work of Carl Schmitt—specifically, Schmitt's famous opening line from *Political Theology*: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception."¹⁰ Turning to Schmitt, we can see how his work is somewhat at cross purposes with itself, and touches on both poles of this special

⁷ See Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁹ Ibid., 4, 1, 23, and 29.

¹⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: For Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.

issue's interest in both religion and the politics of fright. On the one hand, Schmitt's political theology is a sweeping historical generalization in which he argues that the key concepts of modern political theory and practice are secularized theological concepts. One example would be how just as a miracle testifies to how a transcendent and omnipotent God can suspend the natural order of creation, so too might the sovereign decide on the state of exception and thus suspend or stand outside of the rule of law. Likewise, as Schmitt observes, there is a correspondence between a traditional theistic worldview and a monarchical state. In other words, both theology and politics operate according to a similar logic resting on the concept of sovereignty. With this correspondence in mind, it should not be hard for us to imagine how the "marriage of Christianity and fear" as witnessed through the proliferation of Hell House kits and enormous popularity of the *Left Behind* book series feeds into not only a culture of fear but also a politics of fright.

But beyond this analogy between the theological and the political in which to a certain extent contemporary politics are *explained*, Schmitt's legacy rests in his fundamental inquiry into the very nature of the political and its conditions of possibility. It is at this point that Schmitt's conceptual analysis is not unlike the exploratory essay offered here by Daniel Bell. As Bell shows, liberal democracy is historically and theoretically rooted in fear. If fear plays such a constitutive role in our contemporary politics, then perhaps the contemporary political order is in a state of absolute exhaustion and in desperate need of some alternative foundation, some other narrative rooted in the promise of life as opposed to the fear of death. Likewise for Schmitt, if it is true that modern liberal politics was in a state of crisis, then perhaps that crisis was a crisis wrought by the very nature of liberalism itself, and its solution lies not in the resolution of this crisis, but rather, to borrow an image from Slavoj Žižek in *Tarrying with the Negative*, "the wound is healed only by the spear that smote you."¹¹ In other words, in distinction from Bell, Schmitt's answer to the crisis of liberalism, which he sees as both a crisis of political legitimization and a problem of political neutralization or depoliticization, is not by a reassertion of standard liberal orthodoxy calling for peace, toleration, and respect for individual liberties, but a hastening of its very end by a fundamental reconceptualization of the political according to the friend/enemy distinction. Whereas Bell poses the alternative of what he terms the "Gospel of Life" to the liberal politics of fear, Schmitt heightens and highlights the politics of enmity. Put briefly, it is only by putting liberalism to death, once and for all, that a proper politics might be restored.

This is extremely important for our present concern with the politics of fright because, as Jacques Derrida notes in his *The Politics of Friendship*, it shows how Schmitt's accounting of the political *requires* an enemy—any enemy, in fact—for its very existence. Where there is none, an enemy must be created, for without it,

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993), 171.

the very nature and urgency of politics would dissolve. It is by this perverse logic, or what Derrida identifies as a “political crime *against the political itself*,”¹² that a particular political regime has a vested stake in generating or at least identifying its enemies, in stoking the flames of fear so as to consolidate its power and to perpetuate its rule. Accordingly, to lose sight—or even worse, to make peace—with one’s enemy is the worst evil. As Derrida writes:

Following this hypothesis, losing the enemy would not necessarily be progress, reconciliation, or the opening of an era of peace and human fraternity. It would be worse: an unheard-of violence, the evil of a malice knowing neither measure nor ground, an unleashing incommensurable to its unprecedented—therefore monstrous—forms; a violence in the face of which what is called hostility, war, conflict, enmity, cruelty, even hatred, would regain reassuring and ultimately appeasing contours, because they would be *identifiable*.¹³

To make a final comparison, and one that is more explicitly theological, consider the distinction the existentialist Christian theologian of culture Paul Tillich makes between fear and anxiety: “Fear,” Tillich writes in *The Courage to Be*, “has a definite object ..., which can be faced, analyzed, attacked, endured. One can act upon it, and in acting upon it participate in it—even if in the form of struggle. In this way one can take it into one’s self-affirmation.” Anxiety, on the other hand:

has no object, or rather, in a paradoxical sense, its object is the negation of every object. Therefore participation, struggle, and love with respect to it are impossible. He who is in anxiety is, insofar as it is mere anxiety, delivered to it without help ... The only object is the threat itself, but not the source of the threat, because the source of the threat is “nothingness.”¹⁴

By its wedding of a neo-conservative political agenda with a fundamentalist religiosity, the politics of fright is the theo-political instantiation of this deep-seated anxiety. While the definite object of fear can be met with courage, the shadowy, indecipherable nature of anxiety leaves every response lacking, and simultaneously becomes the infinitely fertile ground from which virtually any political decision can be justified. The recent examples of how this deep-rooted culture of anxiety contributes to the politics of fright and the generation of ever new enemies within contemporary American politics are many: the atmospherics of the Cold War is transplaced as the war on terror; Osama bin Laden is morphed into Saddam Hussein as the U.S. led effort to root out the terrorist network of al Qaeda becomes its excuse for the detour into Iraq; the majority of the American public persists in believing that there was some connection between al-Qaeda and Iraq, or that Saddam Hussein had something to do with the planning and operation of the 9/11 attacks, even after the 9/11 Commission report explicitly denies any such link; etc. The politics of fright goes beyond fear

¹² Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (New York: Verso Press, 1997), 83.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1952), 36-37.

as fear is amplified and doubled-back upon itself to the point that it becomes a generalized state of being—or more precisely, non-being, as a presumed democratic state undergoes its own self-annihilation. Thus, a political system based on the principles of limited government and the rule of law becomes a system committed to the consolidation of its power and living in a permanent state of exception.

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What follows is an examination, which is at times political, theological, historical, and sociological, of how this politics of fright relates to the practice of both religion and democracy. The authors here were given free license to respond to this dynamic as they saw fit. The result, the editors at the JCRT believe, is a penetrating and far-ranging set of essays, interviews, and reviews that we hope will bring greater theoretical clarity to the important distinction between fear and fright and provide a timely intervention into the current political order. In this way, we hope that the entire issue is read in light of the challenge issued by Matthew Abraham to contemporary academics—namely, as an uncompromising advocacy of intellectual tradition as criticism; or, put otherwise, as an affirmation of the intellectual's vocation as advocate.

Further, true to the journal's mission to publish cutting-edge scholarship that deals broadly with cultural and religious theory, this special issue provides a sustained focus on the contestation of the religious, political and cultural, which is among the most important and widely discussed issues in contemporary theory. It is also a matter that has the deepest and most wide-ranging impact on our world today. Our hope is that it will prompt further discussion that may contribute to the burgeoning discourse on political theology.

Finally, special thanks are owed to my co-editor for this issue, Peyman Vahabzadeh. It was he who first laid out the parameters for this important discussion. There is no doubt that without his diligence and focus, this work that was begun late in 2004 would have never been completed.

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