

# THE CULTURE OF FEAR

Why Americans Are  
Afraid of the  
Wrong Things

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## **INTRODUCTION TO THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY EDITION**

A decade has passed since the publication of *The Culture of Fear*, during which time the term *culture of fear* has become part of our national lexicon, referenced regularly in academia, the mainstream media, and the blogosphere. Scholarly journals publish papers with titles like “The Culture of Fear and the Politics of Education,” while popular magazines like *Newsweek* print essays about “The (Play) Dating Game: Our Culture of Fear Means That We Can No Longer Count on Spontaneity to Bring Children Together.” Events such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the subsequent “war on terror,” school shootings, vaccine scares, and the election of Barack Obama have given new relevance to many of the concepts I introduced in these pages. We saw numerous instances of individuals and organizations using fear to manipulate the population. They succeeded in large part because, as the book explains, after 30 years of nightly news full of dubious threats, we are fertile soil for fear mongers.<sup>1</sup>

Despite landmark events such as the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the economic downturn that began in 2008, the culture of fear I outlined in this book continues largely as I portrayed it. Pregnant teenagers, monster moms, Internet predators, and suburban thugs still stalk the airwaves. We still shake our heads over the latest mass shooting while

failing to limit access to guns to people who shouldn't have them. We fret over the kidnapping of a single toddler while millions of children live in poverty and attend crumbling schools. Atypical tragedies grab our attention while widespread problems go unaddressed.

Politicians, journalists, advocacy groups, and marketers continue to blow dangers out of proportion for votes, ratings, donations, and profits. Fear mongering for personal, political, and corporate gain continues unabated. Indeed, many of the specific scares I addressed have resurfaced, sometimes in the very same form as earlier, sometimes in new clothes. I will discuss these, as well as significant ways in which our culture of fear has changed, in a major new final chapter.

Throughout the opening of this century, Americans have remained inordinately fearful of unlikely dangers. Even so, at least in some regards, there *have* been changes in our culture of fear. Most notably, foreign terrorists replaced domestic bogeymen as the principal figures in fear mongering by politicians and in much of the media. However, the very same scare tactics I discuss in the pages that follow—misdirection, presenting victims as experts, and treating isolated incidents as trends—have been applied with great success in the newer fear narrative. In the months immediately following 9/11, for example, the attacks elevated to newsworthiness minor airline mishaps and phony bomb threats that previously would not have made headlines, and created an exaggerated sense of individual risk.

## What Is the Price of Fear—and Who Pays?

Nothing has done a better job of exploiting our anxieties than the phrase *the war on terror*, which the Bush administration used incessantly from late 2001 until they left office in early 2009. As former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski noted in the *Washington Post* in 2007, “The little secret here is that the vagueness of the phrase was deliberately (or instinctively) calculated by its sponsors. Constant reference to a ‘war on terror’ did accomplish one major objective: It stimulated the emergence of a culture of fear. Fear obscures reason, intensifies emotions and makes it easier for demagogic politicians to mobilize the public on behalf of the policies they want to pursue.”<sup>2</sup>

The culture of fear predates 9/11 by at least a generation, but Brzezinski accurately described what happens when fear overtakes reason: “The culture of fear is like a genie that has been let out of its bottle. It acquires a life of its own—and can become demoralizing.... We are now divided, uncertain, and potentially very susceptible to panic in the event of another terrorist attack on the United States.”<sup>3</sup>

Whenever one group uses fear to manipulate another, someone benefits and someone pays, as Brzezinski observed. The war on terror had the effect of making us more paranoid not only about terrorists but also about homegrown crime.

After sponsoring a survey in 2003 to gauge just how frightened Americans were, the Chubb Group of Insurance Companies introduced Masterpiece Family Protection. “Home invasion. Child abduction. Carjacking. Stalking threats. Road rage. Air rage. Even hijacking. It’s hard to think that these things could happen to you and your family. Yet, these unthinkable crimes punctuate television news coverage and highlight the pages of newspapers, magazines and websites every day,” declared the company’s website—as if the hyping of these rare events warranted a special insurance policy against them. “Each year, 58,000 children are victims of stranger/non-family abductions,” the site continued, referring to a U.S. Department of Justice study. (Never mind that the study itself made clear that of the 58,000 abductions, only about 115 a year were “stereotypical kidnappings” like that of Polly Klaas or Adam Walsh: “Most children’s nonfamily abduction episodes do not involve elements of the extremely alarming kind of crime that parents and reporters have in mind ... when they think about a kidnapping by a stranger.”)<sup>4</sup>

Emotional reactions to rare but disturbing events also lead to expensive and ineffective public policy. Child abductions, for example, inspire passionate advocates (typically grief-stricken families) to push for legislation they hope will solve the problem. Jessica’s Law, which was passed in California in 2006, is a case in point. It was drafted in response to the murder of nine-year-old Jessica Lunsford, who was raped and killed by a sex offender who had completed his parole. Jessica’s Law stipulates that all sex offenders convicted of a crime in any of thirty-five categories be evaluated by a psychologist before being paroled, even if they had only committed one offense and were juveniles

when they committed it. Prior to the legislation, parolees were evaluated if they had committed at least two offenses in any of nine categories. The goal of the parolee evaluations pre—and post—Jessica’s Law was to identify people who were most likely to commit a sex crime again, and in some cases, to confine them indefinitely to a state mental-health facility instead of paroling them.<sup>5</sup>

Two years after Jessica’s Law was implemented, as California was reeling from a \$42 billion budget deficit, investigative reporters at the *Los Angeles Times* looked into its cost. They discovered that more than \$24 million had been paid to private psychologists in 2007 to evaluate the sex offenders. The state didn’t have enough staff psychologists or psychiatrists to meet the demand, so it had to hire outside evaluators. A few of them made more than a million dollars a year in their part-time gigs for the state. The result? Essentially no change in the number of sex offenders sent to mental hospitals. There were forty-one such cases in the eighteen months prior to Jessica’s Law, and forty-two in the eighteen months after it was implemented.<sup>6</sup>

Fear-driven legislation is good for politicians looking to arouse voters, for advocacy groups looking to attract donations, for ratings-hungry media, and for social scientists, attorneys, and other professionals who choose to cash in on them. Taxpayers foot the bill. And there is another, unintended consequence of fear-based legislation for the public: rather than reassure us, these laws further underscore the already-overhyped danger.

# Seriously Scary

Before September 11, 2001, the toll taken by the culture of fear was not always obvious. Contrivances such as the “war on drugs” (which I deal with in chapter 6), specious menaces like sociopathic juveniles (chapter 3), and bogus medical scares such as “Vaccine Roulette” (chapter 7) were pricey and delusory, but limited. After the attacks of 9/11, exaggerated and unconfirmed scares had more serious and lasting consequences: invading other nations, relinquishing civil rights, censoring ourselves, sanctioning the torture of prisoners, and other missteps I outline in the book’s new final chapter.

As the decade progressed, overblown fears about terrorism and, later, public unease about the Iraq war distracted us from domestic issues that were growing more urgent by the month. In addition to serious, long-standing dangers to Americans’ health and well-being, lax or nonexistent regulations on financial institutions set the stage for a major international economic collapse. Threats to the U.S. financial system, obscured from public view in part by endless attention to the “war on terror,” undermined America’s national security more than Osama bin Laden and his organization ever did. As I note in the first edition’s introduction, the serious problems people ignore often give rise to the very dangers they fear the most.<sup>7</sup>

When I give public talks about the culture of fear, I am frequently asked, “Well, what *should* I be afraid of?” My answer is not “nothing,” as some of my questioners assume. On the contrary, I point out dangerous trends that have been around for a while and are thus viewed as old news and unappealing to the media. Motor vehicle injuries, for example, are the leading cause of death in the U.S. for children ages one to fifteen. Drowning and fires are second and third. Youngsters’ head injuries from bicycle accidents account for nearly 140,000 visits to the emergency room each year. If a parent is concerned about his or her children, their money is best spent on car seats, smoke detectors, swimming lessons, and bike helmets as opposed to GPS locators and child identification kits. They would hardly know that, however, from watching their local TV news or listening to the hype from advocacy groups.<sup>8</sup>

Many of the fear-worthy items I mention in the book are everyday scares we can deal with sensibly as long as we have the facts. More difficult to grasp is an underlying problem that has worsened in the intervening years: the massive gap between rich and poor. The culture of fear contributes to this schism by portraying the poor as threatening and unsympathetic. Yet just as the financial crisis that began in 2008 jeopardized not only people who lost their jobs and homes but also Americans’ strategic foreign interests, the gap between rich and poor threatens not only poor people but all Americans. “Living in a society with wide disparities—in health, in wealth, in education—is worse for all the society’s members, even the well-off,” wrote Elizabeth Gudrais, a journalist and associate editor of *Harvard Magazine*, reporting on a 2008 study about life expectancy in the United States. “Research indicates that high inequality reverberates

through societies on multiple levels, correlating with, if not causing, more crime, less happiness, poorer mental and physical health, less racial harmony, and less civic and political participation.” Gudrais noted that in 2006 the disparity between rich and poor in the United States was at its highest point since 1928, with the top 1 percent of earners drawing 20.3 percent of the total national income.<sup>9</sup>

Gudrais’s article illustrates a positive role that journalists play in the culture of fear. While a major focus of this book is fear mongering by journalists and others, throughout the chapters that follow I take note as well of reporters who bring to light serious dangers about which the public hears little from politicians, corporations, and most of the media. Indeed, again and again I find that it is reporters, rather than government oversight organizations, academics, or other professional truth seekers, who debunk silly or exaggerated scares that other journalists irresponsibly promulgate.

Unfortunately, however, these correctives often occur long after whole sectors of the populace have been scared senseless. Take, for instance, the most public mea culpa I have found in the history of journalistic fear mongering. In 2006, on the twentieth anniversary of its infamous “Marriage Crunch” article, which had declared that a forty-year-old single woman was “more likely to be killed by a terrorist” than to marry, *Newsweek* magazine admitted that “states of unions aren’t what we predicted they’d be.... Beyond all the research studies and forecasts, the trend-spotting and fear

mongering that are too often the stock in trade of both journalists and academics, the real story of this anniversary is the unexpected happily-ever-afters.”

So wrote Daniel McGinn, a national correspondent for the magazine. In a lengthy article, he noted that about 90 percent of baby boomers either have married or will marry, and that most single women over forty who want to wed eventually do so. McGinn also tracked down eleven of the fourteen single women *Newsweek* had profiled in the original story. Only three remained single, and none had divorced.<sup>10</sup>

Another gloomy forecast that had been repeated across all media in the 1980s and ’90s—the fate of “crack babies”—has been soundly rebuffed by journalists as well. At the time, doctors had warned that the infants, “if they survive, are largely doomed to the underclass because of faulty cognitive and psychological development.” Headlines in the nation’s leading newspapers foretold a “bleak,” “joyless” future for such children, despite, as I discuss in chapter 3, considerable evidence at the time suggesting little cause to single out these children for special worry and stigmatization.

By 2009, journalists began to correct their publications’ earlier scare stories. That year, Susan Okie reported in the *New York Times* on the results of studies tracking the lives of these children for nearly fifteen years. “So far, these

scientists say, the long-term effects of such [cocaine and opiate] exposure on children’s brain development and behavior appear relatively small,” wrote Okie. Other media outlets picked up the story or ran their own.<sup>11</sup>

One can only hope that journalists—and public officials, advocates, and academics as well—will not wait so long in the future to question *scares du jour* as they arise.

Better still, one can hope for a future in which fear campaigns fail to sway the public in the first place, a prospect that the Presidential election of 2008 suggested may be more than mere fancy. The entry of Barack Obama early in the campaign provoked many of the racist scare tactics outlined in chapter 5 and added a layer of terrorist and anti-Muslim rhetoric to the mix, with Obama’s detractors repeatedly mentioning his middle name (Hussein) and accusing him of “palling around with terrorists.” Yet despite this, Obama captured the presidency with 52.4 percent of the popular vote. The final chapter of this new edition discusses the various attempts by both Republican and Democratic opponents to frighten voters away from Obama. That these tactics failed is an encouraging testament to Americans’ willingness to vote for—as the Obama campaign put it—hope over fear.

## **INTRODUCTION: WHY AMERICANS FEAR THE WRONG THINGS**

Why are so many fears in the air, and so many of them unfounded? Why, as crime rates plunged throughout the 1990s, did two-thirds of Americans believe they were soaring? How did it come about that by mid-decade 62 percent of us described ourselves as “truly desperate” about crime—almost twice as many as in the late 1980s, when crime rates were higher? Why, on a survey in 1997, when the crime rate had already fallen for a half dozen consecutive years, did more than half of us disagree with the statement “This country is finally beginning to make some progress in solving the crime problem”?<sup>1</sup>

In the late 1990s the number of drug users had decreased by half compared to a decade earlier; almost two-thirds of high school seniors had never used any illegal drugs, even marijuana. So why did a majority of adults rank drug abuse as the greatest danger to America’s youth? Why did nine out of ten believe the drug problem is out of control, and only one in six believe the country was making progress?<sup>2</sup>

Give us a happy ending and we write a new disaster story. In the late 1990s the unemployment rate was below 5 percent for the first time in a quarter century. People who had been pounding the pavement for years could finally get work. Yet pundits warned of imminent economic disaster. They predicted inflation would take off, just as they had a few years earlier—also erroneously—when the unemployment rate dipped below 6 percent.<sup>3</sup>

We compound our worries beyond all reason. Life expectancy in the United States has doubled during the twentieth century. We are better able to cure and control diseases than any other civilization in history. Yet we hear that phenomenal numbers of us are dreadfully ill. In 1996 Bob Garfield, a magazine writer, reviewed articles about serious diseases published over the course of a year in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and *USA Today*. He learned that, in addition to 59 million Americans with heart disease, 53 million with migraines, 25 million with osteoporosis, 16 million with obesity, and 3 million with cancer, many Americans suffer from more obscure ailments such as temporomandibular joint disorders (10 million) and brain injuries (2 million). Adding up the estimates, Garfield determined that 543 million Americans are seriously sick—a shocking number in a nation of 266 million inhabitants. “Either as a society we are doomed, or someone is seriously double-dipping,” he suggested.<sup>4</sup>

Garfield appears to have underestimated one category of patients: for psychiatric ailments his figure was 53 million. Yet when Jim Windolf, an editor of the *New York Observer*, collated estimates for maladies ranging from borderline

personality disorder (10 million) and sex addiction (11 million) to less well-known conditions such as restless leg syndrome (12 million) he came up with a figure of 152 million. “But give the experts a little time,” he advised. “With another new quantifiable disorder or two, everybody in the country will be officially nuts.”<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, Windolf omitted from his estimates new-fashioned afflictions that have yet to make it into the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* of the American Psychiatric Association: ailments such as road rage, which afflicts more than half of Americans, according to a psychologist’s testimony before a congressional hearing in 1997.<sup>6</sup>

The scope of our health fears seems limitless. Besides worrying disproportionately about legitimate ailments and prematurely about would-be diseases, we continue to fret over already refuted dangers. Some still worry, for instance, about “flesh-eating bacteria,” a bug first rammed into our consciousness in 1994 when the U.S. news media picked up on a screamer headline in a British tabloid, “Killer Bug Ate My Face.” The bacteria, depicted as more brutal than anything seen in modern times, was said to be spreading faster than the pack of photographers outside the home of its latest victim. In point of fact, however, we were not “terribly vulnerable” to these “superbugs,” nor were they “medicine’s worst nightmares,” as voices in the media warned.



Group A strep, a cyclical strain that has been around for ages, had been dormant for half a century or more before making a comeback. The British pseudoepidemic had resulted in a total of about a dozen deaths in the previous year. Medical experts roundly rebutted the scares by noting that of 20 to 30 million strep infections each year in the United States fewer than 1 in 1,000 involve serious strep A complications, and only 500 to 1,500 people suffer the flesh-eating syndrome, whose proper name is necrotizing fasciitis. Still the fear persisted. Years after the initial scare, horrifying news stories continued to appear, complete with grotesque pictures of victims. A United Press International story in 1998 typical of the genre told of a child in Texas who died of the “deadly strain” of bacteria that the reporter warned “can spread at a rate of up to one inch per hour.”<sup>2</sup>

## Killer Kids

When we are not worrying about deadly diseases we worry about homicidal strangers. Every few months for the past several years it seems we discover a new category of people to fear: government thugs in Waco, sadistic cops on Los

Angeles freeways and in Brooklyn police stations, mass-murdering youths in small towns all over the country. A single anomalous event can provide us with multiple groups of people to fear. After the 1995 explosion at the federal building in Oklahoma City first we panicked about Arabs. “Knowing that the car bomb indicates Middle Eastern terrorists at work, it’s safe to assume that their goal is to promote free-floating fear and a measure of anarchy, thereby disrupting American life,” a *New York Post* editorial asserted. “Whatever we are doing to destroy Mideast terrorism, the chief terrorist threat against Americans, has not been working,” wrote A. M. Rosenthal in the *New York Times*.<sup>8</sup>

When it turned out that the bombers were young white guys from middle America, two more groups instantly became spooky: right-wing radio talk show hosts who criticize the government—depicted by President Bill Clinton as “purveyors of hatred and division”—and members of militias. No group of disgruntled men was too ragtag not to warrant big, prophetic news stories.<sup>9</sup>

We have managed to convince ourselves that just about every young American male is a potential mass murderer—a remarkable achievement, considering the steep downward trend in youth crime throughout the 1990s. Faced year after year with comforting statistics, we either ignore them—adult Americans estimate that people under eighteen commit about half of all violent crimes when the actual number is 13 percent—or recast them as “The Lull Before the Storm” (*Newsweek* headline). “We know we’ve got about six years to turn this juvenile crime thing around or our

country is going to be living with chaos,” Bill Clinton asserted in 1997, even while acknowledging that the youth violent crime rate had fallen 9.2 percent the previous year.<sup>10</sup>

The more things improve the more pessimistic we become. Violence-related deaths at the nation’s schools dropped to a record low during the 1996–97 academic year (19 deaths out of 54 million children), and only one in ten public schools reported *any* serious crime. Yet *Time* and *U.S. News & World Report* both ran headlines in 1996 referring to “Teenage Time Bombs.” In a nation of “Children Without Souls” (another *Time* headline that year), “America’s beleaguered cities are about to be victimized by a paradigm shattering wave of ultraviolent, morally vacuous young people some call ‘the superpredators,’” William Bennett, the former Secretary of Education, and John Dilulio, a criminologist, forecast in a book published in 1996.<sup>11</sup>

Instead of the arrival of superpredators, violence by urban youths continued to decline. So we went looking elsewhere for proof that heinous behavior by young people was “becoming increasingly more commonplace in America” (CNN). After a sixteen-year-old in Pearl, Mississippi, and a fourteen-year-old in West Paducah, Kentucky, went on shooting sprees in late 1997, killing five of their classmates and wounding twelve others, these isolated incidents were taken as evidence of “an epidemic of seemingly depraved adolescent murderers” (Geraldo Rivera). Three months later in March 1998 all sense of proportion vanished after two boys ages eleven and thirteen killed four students

and a teacher in Jonesboro, Arkansas. No longer, we learned in *Time*, was it “unusual for kids to get back at the world with live ammunition.” When a child psychologist on NBC’s “Today” show advised parents to reassure their children that shootings at schools are rare, reporter Ann Curry corrected him. “But this is the fourth case since October,” she said.<sup>12</sup>

Over the next couple of months young people failed to accommodate the trend hawkers. None committed mass murder. Fear of killer kids remained very much in the air nonetheless. In stories on topics such as school safety and childhood trauma, reporters recapitulated the gory details of the killings. And the news media made a point of reporting every incident in which a child was caught at school with a gun or making a death threat. In May, when a fifteen-year-old in Springfield, Oregon, did open fire in a cafeteria filled with students, killing two and wounding twenty-three others, the event felt like a continuation of a “disturbing trend” (*New York Times*). The day after the shooting, on National Public Radio’s “All Things Considered,” the criminologist Vincent Schiraldi tried to explain that the recent string of incidents did not constitute a trend, that youth homicide rates had declined by 30 percent in recent years, and more than three times as many people were killed by lightning than by violence at schools. But the show’s host, Robert Siegel, interrupted him. “You’re saying these are just anomalous events?” he asked, audibly peeved. The criminologist reiterated that *anomalous* is precisely the right word to describe the events, and he called it “a grave mistake” to imagine otherwise.

Yet given what had happened in Mississippi, Kentucky, Arkansas, and Oregon, could anyone doubt that today's youths are "more likely to pull a gun than make a fist," as Katie Couric declared on the "Today" show?<sup>43</sup>

## Roosevelt Was Wrong

We had better learn to doubt our inflated fears before they destroy us. Valid fears have their place; they cue us to danger. False and overdrawn fears only cause hardship.

Even concerns about real dangers, when blown out of proportion, do demonstrable harm. Take the fear of cancer. Many Americans overestimate the prevalence of the disease, underestimate the odds of surviving it, and put themselves at greater risk as a result. Women in their forties believe they have a 1 in 10 chance of dying from breast cancer, a Dartmouth study found. Their real lifetime odds are more like 1 in 250. Women's heightened perception of risk, rather than motivating them to get checkups or seek treatment, can have the opposite effect. A study of daughters of women

with breast cancer found an inverse correlation between fear and prevention: the greater a daughter's fear of the disease the less frequent her breast self-examination. Studies of the general population—both men and women—find that large numbers of people who believe they have symptoms of cancer delay going to a doctor, often for several months. When asked why, they report they are terrified about the pain and financial ruin cancer can cause as well as poor prospects for a cure. The irony of course is that early treatment can prevent precisely those horrors they most fear.<sup>44</sup>

Still more ironic, if harder to measure, are the adverse consequences of public panics. Exaggerated perceptions of the risks of cancer at least produce beneficial by-products, such as bountiful funding for research and treatment of this leading cause of death. When it comes to large-scale panics, however, it is difficult to see how potential victims benefit from the frenzy. Did panics a few years ago over sexual assaults on children by preschool teachers and priests leave children better off? Or did they prompt teachers and clergy to maintain excessive distance from children in their care, as social scientists and journalists who have studied the panics suggest? How well can care givers do their jobs when regulatory agencies, teachers' unions, and archdioceses explicitly prohibit them from any physical contact with children, even kindhearted hugs?<sup>45</sup>

Was it a good thing for children and parents that male day care providers left the profession for fear of being falsely accused of sex crimes? In an article in the *Journal of American Culture*, sociologist Mary DeYoung has argued that day

care was “refeminized” as a result of the panics. “Once again, and in the time-honored and very familiar tradition of the family, the primary responsibility for the care and socialization of young children was placed on the shoulders of low-paid women,” she contends.<sup>16</sup>

We all pay one of the costs of panics: huge sums of money go to waste. Hysteria over the ritual abuse of children cost billions of dollars in police investigations, trials, and imprisonments. Men and women went to jail for years “on the basis of some of the most fantastic claims ever presented to an American jury,” as Dorothy Rabinowitz of the *Wall Street Journal* demonstrated in a series of investigative articles for which she became a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 1996. Across the nation expensive surveillance programs were implemented to protect children from fiends who reside primarily in the imaginations of adults.<sup>17</sup>

The price tag for our panic about overall crime has grown so monumental that even law-and-order zealots find it hard to defend. The criminal justice system costs Americans close to \$100 billion a year, most of which goes to police and prisons. In California we spend more on jails than on higher education. Yet increases in the number of police and prison cells do not correlate consistently with reductions in the number of serious crimes committed. Criminologists who study reductions in homicide rates, for instance, find little difference between cities that substantially expand their police forces and prison capacity and others that do not.<sup>18</sup>

The turnabout in domestic public spending over the past quarter century, from child welfare and antipoverty programs to incarceration, did not even produce reductions in *fear* of crime. Increasing the number of cops and jails arguably has the opposite effect: it suggests that the crime problem is all the more out of control.<sup>19</sup>

Panic-driven public spending generates over the long term a pathology akin to one found in drug addicts. The more money and attention we fritter away on our compulsions, the less we have available for our real needs, which consequently grow larger. While fortunes are being spent to protect children from dangers that few ever encounter, approximately 11 million children lack health insurance, 12 million are malnourished, and rates of illiteracy are increasing.<sup>20</sup>

I do not contend, as did President Roosevelt in 1933, that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” My point is that we often fear the wrong things. In the 1990s middle-income and poorer Americans should have worried about unemployment insurance, which covered a smaller share of workers than twenty years earlier. Many of us have had friends or family out of work during economic downturns or as a result of corporate restructuring. Living in a nation with one of the largest income gaps of any industrialized country, where the bottom 40 percent of the population is worse off financially than their counterparts two decades earlier, we might also have worried about income inequality. Or poverty. During the mid- and late 1990s 5 million elderly Americans had no food in their homes, more than 20

million people used emergency food programs each year, and one in five children lived in poverty—more than a quarter million of them homeless. All told, a larger proportion of Americans were poor than three decades earlier.<sup>21</sup>

One of the paradoxes of a culture of fear is that serious problems remain widely ignored even though they give rise to precisely the dangers that the populace most abhors. Poverty, for example, correlates strongly with child abuse, crime, and drug abuse. Income inequality is also associated with adverse outcomes for society as a whole. The larger the gap between rich and poor in a society, the higher its overall death rates from heart disease, cancer, and murder. Some social scientists argue that extreme inequality also threatens political stability in a nation such as the United States, where we think of ourselves not as “haves and have nots” but as “haves and will haves.” “Unlike the citizens of most other nations, Americans have always been united less by a shared past than by the shared dreams of a better future. If we lose that common future,” the Brandeis University economist Robert Reich has suggested, “we lose the glue that holds our nation together.”<sup>22</sup>

The combination of extreme inequality and poverty can prove explosive. In an insightful article in *U.S. News & World Report* in 1997 about militia groups reporters Mike Tharp and William Holstein noted that people’s motivations for joining these groups are as much economic as ideological. The journalists argued that the disappearance of military and blue-collar jobs, along with the decline of family farming, created the conditions under which a new breed of protest

groups flourished. “What distinguishes these antigovernment groups from, say, traditional conservatives who mistrust government is that their anger is fueled by direct threats to their livelihood, and they carry guns,” Tharp and Holstein wrote.<sup>23</sup>

That last phrase alludes to a danger that by any rational calculation deserves top billing on Americans’ lists of fears. So gun crazed is this nation that Burger King had to order a Baltimore franchise to stop giving away coupons from a local sporting goods store for free boxes of bullets with the purchase of guns. We have more guns *stolen* from their owners—about 300,000 annually—than many countries have gun owners. In Great Britain, Australia, and Japan, where gun ownership is severely restricted, no more than a few dozen people are killed each year by handguns. In the United States, where private citizens own a quarter-billion guns, around 15,000 people are killed, 18,000 commit suicide, and another 1,500 die accidentally from firearms. American children are twelve times more likely to die from gun injuries than are youngsters in other industrialized nations.<sup>24</sup>

Yet even after tragedies that could not have occurred except for the availability of guns, their significance is either played down or missed altogether. Had the youngsters in the celebrated schoolyard shootings of 1997–98 not had access to guns, some or all of the people they killed would be alive today. Without their firepower those boys lacked the strength, courage, and skill to commit multiple murders. Nevertheless newspapers ran editorials with titles such as “It’s

Not Guns, It's Killer Kids" (*Fort Worth Star—Telegram*) and "Guns Aren't the Problem" (*New York Post*), and journalists, politicians, and pundits blathered on endlessly about every imaginable cause of youthful rage, from "the psychology of violence in the South" to satanism to fights on "Jerry Springer" and simulated shooting in Nintendo games.<sup>25</sup>

## Two Easy Explanations

In the following discussion I will try to answer two questions: Why are Americans so fearful lately, and why are our fears so often misplaced? To both questions the same two-word answer is commonly given by scholars and journalists: premillennial tensions. The final years of a millennium and the early years of a new millennium provoke mass anxiety and ill reasoning, the argument goes. So momentous does the calendric change seem, the populace cannot keep its wits about it.

Premillennial tensions probably do help explain some of our collective irrationality. Living in a scientific era, most of us grant the arbitrariness of reckoning time in base-ten rather than, say, base-twelve, and from the birth of Christ rather than from the day Muhammad moved from Mecca. Yet even the least superstitious among us cannot quite manage to think of the year 2000 as ordinary. Social psychologists have long recognized a human urge to convert vague uneasiness into definable concerns, real or imagined. In a classic study thirty years ago Alan Kerckhoff and Kurt Back pointed out that "the belief in a tangible threat makes it possible to explain and justify one's sense of discomfort."<sup>26</sup>

Some historical evidence also supports the hypothesis that people panic at the brink of centuries and millennia. Witness the "panic terror" in Europe around the year 1000 and the witch hunts in Salem in the 1690s. As a complete or dependable explanation, though, the millennium hypothesis fails. Historians emphasize that panics of equal or greater intensity occur in odd years, as demonstrated by anti-Indian hysteria in the mid 1700s and McCarthyism in the 1950s. Scholars point out too that calendars cannot account for why certain fears occupy people at certain times (witches then, killer kids now).<sup>27</sup>

Another popular explanation blames the news media. We have so many fears, many of them off-base, the argument goes, because the media bombard us with sensationalistic stories designed to increase ratings. This explanation, sometimes called the media-effects theory, is less simplistic than the millennium hypothesis and contains sizable

kernels of truth. When researchers from Emory University computed the levels of coverage of various health dangers in popular magazines and newspapers they discovered an inverse relationship: much less space was devoted to several of the major causes of death than to some uncommon causes. The leading cause of death, heart disease, received approximately the same amount of coverage as the eleventh-ranked cause of death, homicide. They found a similar inverse relationship in coverage of risk factors associated with serious illness and death. The lowest-ranking risk factor, drug use, received nearly as much attention as the second-ranked risk factor, diet and exercise.<sup>28</sup>

Disproportionate coverage in the news media plainly has effects on readers and viewers. When Esther Madriz, a professor at Hunter College, interviewed women in New York City about their fears of crime they frequently responded with the phrase “I saw it in the news.” The interviewees identified the news media as both the source of their fears and the reason they believed those fears were valid. Asked in a national poll why they believe the country has a serious crime problem, 76 percent of people cited stories they had seen in the media. Only 22 percent cited personal experience.<sup>29</sup>

When professors Robert Blendon and John Young of Harvard analyzed forty-seven surveys about drug abuse conducted between 1978 and 1997, they too discovered that the news media, rather than personal experience, provide Americans with their predominant fears. Eight out of ten adults say that drug abuse has never caused problems in their family, and the vast majority report relatively little direct experience with problems related to drug abuse. Widespread

concern about drug problems emanates, Blendon and Young determined, from scares in the news media, television in particular.<sup>30</sup>

Television news programs survive on scares. On local newscasts, where producers live by the dictum “if it bleeds, it leads,” drug, crime, and disaster stories make up most of the news portion of the broadcasts. Evening newscasts on the major networks are somewhat less bloody, but between 1990 and 1998, when the nation’s murder rate declined by 20 percent, the number of murder stories on network newscasts increased 600 percent (*not counting stories about O.J. Simpson*).<sup>31</sup>

After the dinnertime newscasts the networks broadcast newsmagazines, whose guiding principle seems to be that no danger is too small to magnify into a national nightmare. Some of the risks reported by such programs would be merely laughable were they not hyped with so much fanfare: “Don’t miss *Dateline* tonight or YOU could be the next victim!” Competing for ratings with drama programs and movies during prime-time evening hours, newsmagazines feature story lines that would make a writer for “Homicide” or “ER” wince.<sup>32</sup>

“It can happen in a flash. Fire breaks out on the operating table. The patient is surrounded by flames,” Barbara Walters exclaimed on ABC’s “20/20” in 1998. The problem—oxygen from a face mask ignited by a surgical

instrument—occurs “more often than you might think,” she cautioned in her introduction, even though reporter Arnold Diaz would note later, during the actual report, that out of 27 million surgeries each year the situation arises only about a hundred times. No matter, Diaz effectively nullified the reassuring numbers as soon as they left his mouth. To those who “may say it’s too small a risk to worry about” he presented distraught victims: a woman with permanent scars on her face and a man whose son had died.<sup>33</sup>

The gambit is common. Producers of TV newsmagazines routinely let emotional accounts trump objective information. In 1994 medical authorities attempted to cut short the brouhaha over flesh-eating bacteria by publicizing the fact that an American is fifty-five times more likely to be struck by lightning than die of the suddenly celebrated microbe. Yet TV journalists brushed this fact aside with remarks like, “whatever the statistics, it’s devastating to the victims” (Catherine Crier on “20/20”), accompanied by stomach-turning videos of disfigured patients.<sup>34</sup>

Sheryl Stolberg, then a medical writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, put her finger on what makes the TV newsmagazines so cavalier: “Killer germs are perfect for prime time,” she wrote. “They are invisible, uncontrollable, and, in the case of Group A strep, can invade the body in an unnervingly simple manner, through a cut or scrape.” Whereas print journalists only described in words the actions of “billions of bacteria” spreading “like underground fires”

throughout a person’s body, TV newsmagazines made use of special effects to depict graphically how these “merciless killers” do their damage.<sup>35</sup>

## In Praise of Journalists

Any analysis of the culture of fear that ignored the news media would be patently incomplete, and of the several institutions most culpable for creating and sustaining scares the news media are arguably first among equals. They are also the most promising candidates for positive change. Yet by the same token critiques such as Stolberg’s presage a crucial shortcoming in arguments that blame the media. Reporters not only spread fears, they also debunk them and criticize one another for spooking the public. A wide array of groups, including businesses, advocacy organizations, religious sects, and political parties, promote and profit from scares. News organizations are distinguished from other fear-mongering groups because they sometimes bite the scare that feeds them.



A group that raises money for research into a particular disease is not likely to negate concerns about that disease. A company that sells alarm systems is not about to call attention to the fact that crime is down. News organizations, on the other hand, periodically allay the very fears they arouse to lure audiences. Some newspapers that ran stories about child murderers, rather than treat every incident as evidence of a shocking trend, affirmed the opposite. After the schoolyard shooting in Kentucky the *New York Times* ran a sidebar alongside its feature story with the headline “Despite Recent Carnage, School Violence Is Not on Rise.” Following the Jonesboro killings they ran a similar piece, this time on a recently released study showing the rarity of violent crimes in schools.<sup>36</sup>

Several major newspapers parted from the pack in other ways. *USA Today* and the *Washington Post*, for instance, made sure their readers knew that what should worry them is the availability of guns. *USA Today* ran news stories explaining that easy access to guns in homes accounted for increases in the number of juvenile arrests for homicide in rural areas during the 1990s. While other news outlets were respectfully quoting the mother of the thirteen-year-old Jonesboro shooter, who said she did not regret having encouraged her son to learn to fire a gun (“it’s like anything else, there’s some people that can drink a beer and not become an alcoholic”), *USA Today* ran an op-ed piece proposing legal parameters for gun ownership akin to those for the use of alcohol and motor vehicles. And the paper published its own editorial in support of laws that require gun owners to lock their guns or keep them in locked containers. Adopted at

that time by only fifteen states, the laws had reduced the number of deaths among children in those states by 23 percent.<sup>37</sup>

The *Washington Post*, meanwhile, published an excellent investigative piece by reporter Sharon Walsh showing that guns increasingly were being marketed to teenagers and children. Quoting advertisements and statistics from gun manufacturers and the National Rifle Association, Walsh revealed that by 1998 the primary market for guns—white males—had been saturated and an effort to market to women had failed. Having come to see children as its future, the gun industry has taken to running ads like the one Walsh found in a Smith & Wesson catalog: “Seems like only yesterday that your father brought you here for the first time,” reads the copy beside a photo of a child aiming a handgun, his father by his side. “Those sure were the good times—just you, dad and his Smith & Wesson.”<sup>38</sup>

As a social scientist I am impressed and somewhat embarrassed to find that journalists, more often than media scholars, identify the jugglery involved in making small hazards appear huge and huge hazards disappear from sight. Take, for example, the scare several years ago over the Ebola virus. Another *Washington Post* reporter, John Schwartz, identified a key bit of hocus-pocus used to sell that scare. Schwartz called it “the Cuisinart Effect,” because it involves the mashing together of images and story lines from fiction and reality. A report by *Dateline NBC* on deaths in Zaire, for instance, interspersed clips from *Outbreak*, a movie whose plot involves a lethal virus that threatens to kill the entire

U.S. population. Alternating between Dustin Hoffman's character exclaiming, "We can't stop it!" and real-life science writer Laurie Garrett, author of *The Coming Plague*, proclaiming that "HIV is not an aberration ... it's part of a trend," *Dateline's* report gave the impression that swarms of epidemics were on their way.<sup>39</sup>

Another great journalist-debunker, Malcolm Gladwell, noted that the book that had inspired *Outbreak*, Richard Preston's *The Hot Zone*, itself was written "in self-conscious imitation of a sci-fi thriller." In the real-world incident that occasioned *The Hot Zone*, monkeys infected in Zaire with a strain of Ebola virus were quarantined at a government facility in Reston, Virginia. The strain turned out not to be lethal in humans, but neither Preston in his book nor the screenwriters for *Outbreak* nor TV producers who sampled from the movie let that anticlimax interfere with the scare value of their stories. Preston speculates about an airborne strain of Ebola being carried by travelers from African airports to European, Asian, and American cities. In *Outbreak* hundreds of people die from such an airborne strain before a cure is miraculously discovered in the nick of time to save humanity. In truth, Gladwell points out in a piece in *The New Republic*, an Ebola strain that is both virulent to humans and airborne is unlikely to emerge and would mutate rapidly if it did, becoming far less potent before it had a chance to infect large numbers of people on a single continent, much less throughout the globe. "It is one of the ironies of the analysis of alarmists such as Preston that they are all too willing to point out the limitations of human beings, but they neglect to point out the limitations of microscopic life forms," Gladwell notes.<sup>40</sup>

Such disproofs of disease scares appear rather frequently in general-interest magazines and newspapers, including in publications where one might not expect to find them. The *Wall Street Journal*, for instance, while primarily a business publication and itself a retailer of fears about governmental regulators, labor unions, and other corporate-preferred hobgoblins, has done much to demolish medical myths. Among my personal favorites is an article published in 1996 titled "Fright by the Numbers," in which reporter Cynthia Crossen rebuts a cover story in *Time* magazine on prostate cancer. One in five men will get the disease, *Time* thundered. "That's scary. But it's also a lifetime risk—the accumulated risk over some 80 years of life," Crossen responds. A forty-year-old's chance of coming down with (not dying of) prostate cancer in the next ten years is 1 in 1,000, she goes on to report. His odds rise to 1 in 100 over twenty years. Even by the time he's seventy, he has only a 1 in 20 chance of *any* kind of cancer, including prostate.<sup>41</sup>

In the same article Crossen counters other alarmist claims as well, such as the much-repeated pronouncement that one in three Americans is obese. The number actually refers to how many are overweight, a less serious condition. Fewer are *obese* (a term that is less than objective itself), variously defined as 20 to 40 percent above ideal body weight as determined by current standards.<sup>42</sup>

# Morality and Marketing

To blame the media is to oversimplify the complex role that journalists play as both proponents and doubters of popular fears. It is also to beg the same key issue that the millennium hypothesis evades: why particular anxieties take hold when they do. Why do news organizations and their audiences find themselves drawn to one hazard rather than another?

Mary Douglas, the eminent anthropologist who devoted much of her career to studying how people interpret risk, pointed out that every society has an almost infinite quantity of potential dangers from which to choose. Societies differ both in the types of dangers they select and the number. Dangers get selected for special emphasis, Douglas showed, either because they offend the basic moral principles of the society or because they enable criticism of disliked groups and institutions. In *Risk and Culture*, a book she wrote with Aaron Wildavsky, the authors give an example from fourteenth-century Europe. Impure water had been a health danger long before that time, but only after it became convenient to accuse Jews of poisoning the wells did people become preoccupied with it.

Or take a more recent institutional example. In the first half of the 1990s U.S. cities spent at least \$10 billion to purge asbestos from public schools, even though removing asbestos from buildings posed a greater health hazard than leaving it in place. At a time when about one-third of the nation's schools were in need of extensive repairs the money might have been spent to renovate dilapidated buildings. But hazards posed by seeping asbestos are morally repugnant. A product that was supposed to protect children from fires might be giving them cancer. By directing our worries and dollars at asbestos we express outrage at technology and industry run afoul.<sup>43</sup>

From a psychological point of view extreme fear and outrage are of ten projections. Consider, for example, the panic over violence against children. By failing to provide adequate education, nutrition, housing, parenting, medical services, and child care over the past couple of decades we have done the nation's children immense harm. Yet we project our guilt onto a cavalcade of bogeypeople—pedophile preschool teachers, preteen mass murderers, and homicidal au pairs, to name only a few.<sup>44</sup>

When Debbie Nathan, a journalist, and Michael Snedeker, an attorney, researched the evidence behind publicized reports in the 1980s and early 1990s of children being ritually raped and tortured they learned that although seven out of ten Americans believed that satanic cults were committing these atrocities, few of the incidents had actually occurred. At the outset of each ritual-abuse case the children involved claimed they had not been molested. They later changed

their tunes at the urging of parents and law enforcement authorities. The ghastly tales of abuse, it turns out, typically came from the parents themselves, usually the mothers, who had convinced themselves they were true. Nathan and Snedeker suggest that some of the mothers had been abused themselves and projected those horrors, which they had trouble facing directly, onto their children. Other mothers, who had not been victimized in those ways, used the figure of ritually abused children as a medium of protest against male dominance more generally. Allegations of children being raped allowed conventional wives and mothers to speak out against men and masculinity without having to fear they would seem unfeminine. “The larger culture,” Nathan and Snedeker note, “still required that women’s complaints about inequality and sexual violence be communicated through the innocent, mortified voice of the child.”

Diverse groups used the ritual-abuse scares to diverse ends. Well-known feminists such as Gloria Steinem and Catharine MacKinnon took up the cause, depicting ritually abused children as living proof of the ravages of patriarchy and the need for fundamental social reform.<sup>45</sup>

This was far from the only time feminist spokeswomen have mongered fears about sinister breeds of men who exist in nowhere near the high numbers they allege. Another example occurred a few years ago when teen pregnancy was much in the news. Feminists helped popularize the frightful but erroneous statistic that two out of three teen mothers

had been seduced and abandoned by adult men. The true figure is more like one in ten, but some feminists continued to cultivate the scare well after the bogus stat had been definitively debunked.<sup>46</sup>

Within public discourse fears proliferate through a process of exchange. It is from crosscurrents of scares and counterscares that the culture of fear swells ever larger. Even as feminists disparage large classes of men, they themselves are a staple of fear mongering by conservatives. To hear conservatives tell it, feminists are not only “anti-child and anti-family” (Arianna Huffington) but through women’s studies programs on college campuses they have fomented an “anti-science and anti-reason movement” (Christina Hoff Sommers).<sup>47</sup>

Conservatives also like to spread fears about liberals, who respond in kind. Among other pet scares, they accuse liberals of creating “children without consciences” by keeping prayer out of schools—to which liberals rejoin with warnings that right-wing extremists intend to turn youngsters into Christian soldiers.<sup>48</sup>

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was right when he claimed, “In politics, what begins in fear usually ends up in folly.” Political activists are more inclined, though, to heed an observation from Richard Nixon: “People react to fear, not love. They don’t teach that in Sunday school, but it’s true.” That principle, which guided the late president’s political strategy

throughout his career, is the sine qua non of contemporary political campaigning. Marketers of products and services ranging from car alarms to TV news programs have taken it to heart as well.<sup>49</sup>

The short answer to why Americans harbor so many misbegotten fears is that immense power and money await those who tap into our moral insecurities and supply us with symbolic substitutes. This book provides the longer answer by identifying the actual vendors of our fears, their marketing methods, and incentives the rest of us must buy into.

# I

## DUBIOUS DANGERS ON ROADWAYS AND CAMPUSES

### How Fears Are Sold

Start with silly scares, the kind that would be laughable were they not advanced with utter seriousness by influential organizations, politicians, and news media. Promoted by the same means as other fears—and often to the same ends—they afford a comfortable entry point into the fear mongers’ bag of tricks. It becomes easier to recognize how we are bamboozled about serious concerns, having seen the same techniques at work in the promotion of frivolous dangers.

## Scenarios Substitute for Facts

“There is no terror in the bang, only in the anticipation of it,” said the ultimate master of terror, Alfred Hitchcock. Fear mongers regularly put his wisdom to use by depicting would-be perils as imminent disasters. “They’re all around you, everywhere you drive, waiting to explode,” exclaimed an announcer at the beginning of ABC’s newsmagazine “20/20” in 1996, devoted to what he called “a growing American danger—road rage.” Hugh Downs, the program’s coanchor, continued the ruse. Eliciting viewers’ everyday experiences, he recast them as portentous. “How many times have you been bullied on the road, honked at or tailed, cursed at by another driver? Maybe you’ve done this yourself. Well, tonight, you will see again where this kind of aggression can lead,” said Downs, insinuating that viewers had already anticipated what Tom Jarriel, the reporter whose story he then introduced, was about to detail.<sup>1</sup>

A seemingly innocuous beep of the car horn can lead, Jarriel said, to “anger so explosive it pushes people over the edge: fist fights, even shootings, between perfect strangers.” Out in the real world, people honk their horns all the time without getting socked or shot, but in the fluid logic of Jarriel’s narrative stark imagery and atypical anecdotes eclipsed

reality. “It happens without warning to ordinary people,” Jarriel said, and to prove the point, he interviewed a man who was shot in the face after cutting someone off on a highway.

Oprah Winfrey, in a program on road rage in 1997, used the same approach. First she transmuted familiar occurrences into a huge new danger. “We’ve all been there. It starts out with the tap of the horn, an angry gesture, a dirty look ...,” she declared. Then she proceeded to recount a few actual incidents in which the outcome was a shooting or fistfight. That expressions of annoyance almost never intensify to a shooting or fight was beside the point. “This is a show that affects so many people,” she said, and then cleverly produced an impressive but ultimately meaningless number. “This woman’s biggest offense was pulling out of her driveway ... countless millions of you have done that,” she said in the course of introducing someone who had been attacked by another driver.<sup>2</sup>

Journalists in the print media used a slightly different tactic. Call it the foreshadowing anecdote. After relaying the gory details of a particular instance of highway violence, they asserted that the given example “raises the overarching question of road anarchy” (*Time*) or represents “just the latest case of ‘road rage’ to gain national attention” (*USA Today*). A page-one story in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1998 declared that “road rage has become an exploding phenomenon across the country” and depicted the Pacific Northwest as a region particularly “plagued by a rise in road rage.” Only after wading through twenty-two paragraphs of alarming first-person accounts and warnings from

authorities did the reader learn that a grand total of five drivers and passengers had died in road rage incidents in the region over the previous five years.<sup>3</sup>

An average of one death a year constitutes a plague? The only other statistical evidence the reporter managed to muster was from a study released in 1997 by the American Automobile Association. Cited habitually in stories about road rage, the AAA study afforded reporters an opportunity to declare that incidents of road rage had “been rising 7% a year” (*Los Angeles Times*), or as *People* magazine put it, “more than 50 percent since 1990.” I found only one article that put the AAA’s findings in proper perspective: a piece in *U.S. News & World Report* noted that, of approximately 250,000 people killed on roadways between 1990 and 1997, the AAA attributed 218 deaths, or less than one in a thousand, directly to angry drivers. And of the 20 million motorists injured during that period the AAA attributed less than 1 percent of those injuries to aggressive driving.<sup>4</sup>

Big percentages do not necessarily have big numbers behind them. The dramatic “up more than 50%” statistic in the AAA study derived from the difference between two relatively modest figures: the number of traffic incidents that involved major violence in 1990 (1,129) compared to 1996 (1,800). An increase of 671 incidents in fifty states over seven years is hardly “a growing epidemic” (*USA Today*’s description of road rage). Nor does it warrant the thousands of stories about road rage that appeared in print and on radio and television—coverage that helped produce the 671 figure

in the first place. The AAA derived their estimates from newspaper, police, and insurance reports, all of which are influenced by hype. The more talk there is about road rage, the more likely are newspaper reporters, police officers, and insurance agents to classify as examples of it incidents that they would have ignored altogether or catalogued differently in the past.<sup>5</sup>

Psychologists refer to this phenomenon as the Pygmalion effect, in deference to George Bernard Shaw. In Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Liza comes to appreciate that, as she puts it to Colonel Pickering, "the difference between a flower girl and a lady is not how she behaves, but how she's treated." Posits Liza, during an exchange with the Colonel, "I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treats me as a flower girl, but I know I can be a lady to you, because you always treat me as a lady, and always will."<sup>6</sup>

In the late 1990s police and reporters treated all variety of highway mishaps as road rage. One evening in 1998 the lead image on local news shows in Los Angeles was a car that had been sliced in half by a truck on a freeway. The fatal accident had been caused by the driver going up an exit ramp in the wrong direction, but reporters and highway patrol officers labeled it "another case of road rage." Their justification? Witnesses reported the driver had been tailgating a van just moments earlier. At the time she drove up the exit ramp and into oncoming traffic she was neither a

perpetrator nor victim of road rage, but because she may have acted aggressively in the recent past the incident could be counted as road rage.<sup>7</sup>

A few days after that incident, when an off-duty prison guard was shot dead on a freeway ramp, police and reporters described the event as "a random act of violence, like other examples of so-called road rage violence plaguing the nation's motorists" (*Los Angeles Times*). This time too the characterization was unfounded. The victim's husband, who had been driving the car, let police know immediately after the event that it was neither random nor an instance of road rage. According to his account, their assailants had followed them from a shopping mall, forced them to pull off the road, and stolen money. It was when his wife pulled out her state corrections officer badge, the husband reported, that they shot her. Police later suspected the husband himself in the murder, but never was road rage a likely hypothesis.<sup>8</sup>



# Bad People Substitute for Bad Policies

Stories about road rage left little doubt as to what, or rather who, was responsible—vicious strangers. Over the past decade or so police and reporters had warned of disparate new categories of creeps out to get us—home invasion robbers, carjackers, child nabbers, deranged postal workers. Now they were issuing an even broader warning. Everywhere we go are “strangers in their cars, ready to snap, driven to violence by the wrong move,” the announcer on “20/20” cautioned. Indeed, Tom Jarriel went on to suggest, “the most disturbing aspect of the growing trend toward roadway violence is that we can’t choose who we drive with on the highways.”<sup>9</sup>

In just about every contemporary American scare, rather than confront disturbing shortcomings in society the public discussion centers on disturbed individuals. Demented drivers rather than insane public policies occupied center stage in the coverage of road rage. Where reference was made at all to serious problems that drivers face, these were promptly shoved behind a curtain of talk about violent motorists. “Roads are more crowded all the time, which means more delays and more frustration,” National Public Radio’s Alex Chadwick reported, but rather than pursue the point with

insights from, say, experts on mass transit, he quotes someone from the AAA who contends that driving “frees the beast” in people.<sup>10</sup>

In *USA Today* reporter Patrick O’Driscoll notes that 70 percent of urban freeways are clogged at rush hour (up 15 percent over the past fifteen years) and that traffic exceeds road capacity in most U.S. cities. Did he then go on to consider possibilities for relieving the congestion? On the contrary, his next sentence began, “Faced with tempers boiling over like radiators in rush-hour gridlock, police agencies are seeking ways to brand aggressive driving as socially unacceptable . . .”<sup>11</sup>

Rather than traffic experts journalists spotlighted police officials, who understandably took the opportunity to urge the hiring of more officers. Or reporters turned to so-called experts such as Arnold Nerenberg, a psychologist who dubs himself “America’s road-rage therapist” and runs a web site ([www.roadrage.com](http://www.roadrage.com)) where he brags that he has been featured in dozens of TV programs and magazines. Not a researcher, Nerenberg nonetheless offers authoritative-sounding sound bites that support reporters’ portrayal of highway violence as personal pathology. “There’s a deep psychological urge,” he tells *Newsweek*, “to release aggression against an anonymous other.” Road rage is “a mental disorder that is contagious,” *USA Today* quotes him. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Nerenberg called on the American Psychiatric Association to add road rage to its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM).

At some point in their lives, he said, more than half of the U.S. population suffers from the disorder, which Nerenberg described on ABC's "World News Tonight" as "an adjustment reaction disorder."<sup>12</sup>

Such psychoblatner only obscures what even Nerenberg himself knows to be the primary instrument of murder on the nation's roadways. Asked directly by *People* magazine whether there is truly any difference between now and twenty years ago, Nerenberg allows, "One thing that makes the problem worse is that we have more Americans arming themselves. Millions of us illegally carry loaded weapons. The more guns in cars, the greater the chance they'll be used."<sup>13</sup>

Most of the coverage of road rage, however, shamelessly disregarded the import of firearms, even though the AAA study found that offenders in road rage incidents often use guns to kill or injure their victims. On Oprah Winfrey's show devoted to road rage the murder of one driver by another was recounted tearfully and in detail by the victim's fiancé as well as by the man who killed him. But at no point in the program did anyone mention that the victim would almost certainly have survived had there not been a gun involved. In fact, when Winfrey brought on the head of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, his only mention of weapons was metaphoric. He referred to cars as "three-thousand-pound weapons."<sup>14</sup>

Experts who do try to direct attention to the matter of guns seldom succeed. In a road rage story on CNN occasioned by a fatal shooting, the local district attorney counseled against "too many guns in cars" and made a comparison: "When you go to Canada, they ask you, 'Do you have any guns in your car,' because you have to check them at their border. If you're coming from Canada to this country, they ask you if you have any fruit." Rather than pursue the matter CNN correspondent Dennis O'Hayer promptly shifted the focus. "Even if you don't have a gun, your own driving tactics could be setting you up for a dangerous face-off," he said. Someone identified as a traffic columnist with the *Atlanta Constitution* then proceeded to urge viewers against death-defying acts such as "getting in the left lane and holding up traffic."<sup>15</sup>

One of my initial hypotheses about why pseudodangers receive so much attention was that they provide opportunities to talk about, and perhaps rectify, problems too big to face in their totality. Stupefied by the quantity of guns on the streets, we might focus on doing something about the much smaller number in cars. My hypothesis could not have been farther from the truth. Pseudodangers represent further opportunities to avoid problems we do not want to confront, such as overcrowded roads and the superabundance of guns, as well as those we have grown tired of confronting. An example of the latter is drunk driving, a behavior that causes about eighty-five times as many deaths as road rage (about 17,000 versus 200). Close to half of all fatal traffic crashes involve alcohol, and three in five Americans will be involved in an alcohol-related crash at some point in their lives. Moved by those statistics and by the advocacy

group, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, journalists had covered the issue of drunk driving in a sound and sustained way throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Thanks in part to that coverage, the number of alcohol-related highway deaths plunged by 31 percent between 1982 and 1995. Fatality rates fall twice as rapidly, studies find, in years of high media attention compared to those of relatively little attention. Intensive coverage permits passage of powerful laws, creation of sobriety checkpoints, and new notions such as the “designated driver,” all of which save lives.<sup>16</sup>

Yet by the mid-1990s groups like MADD were finding it difficult to be heard in the media over the noise about road rage and other trendy issues. In the years that followed the fatality rate stopped declining. Polls taken on the eastern seaboard during the late 1990s found people more concerned about road rage than drunk driving. Who could blame them when they read in their local paper, “It’s not drunken or elderly or inexperienced drivers who are wreaking havoc. Instead, scores of people are severely injured or killed every day by stressed-out drivers who have abandoned civil roadway behavior” (*Philadelphia Daily News*).<sup>17</sup>

## The Power of Calling Something “P.C.”

If the first of those two sentences by Don Russell of the *Daily News* inverted the truth about dangerous drivers, the second misled more broadly still. Russell is one of several writers on road rage who alluded to the issue of civility. Reporters variously raised the matter themselves or quoted police officers declaring that “people have forgotten how to be civil to each other” (*USA Today*). In so doing they exemplified another unfortunate hallmark of fear mongering: the tendency to trivialize legitimate concerns even while aggrandizing questionable ones.<sup>18</sup>

Worries about Americans acting uncivilly toward one another date back at least to frontier days, and in our present era bad behavior behind the wheel is far from the most significant or pressing form of incivility. At a time when a disabled black man in Texas was beaten by racists then chained to a truck and dragged down a road to his death and a gay college student in Wyoming was tied to a fence, pistol-whipped, and left to die, we would do well to focus our sights on big-time incivilities such as racism and homophobia. Instead we are diverted by willy-nilly references in stories about road rage, or worse, by fear mongers who *intentionally* set out to confuse matters.<sup>19</sup>

One of the most effective scare campaigns of the late twentieth century—political correctness on college campuses—was undertaken for the express purpose of changing the terms of debate about civility. The people who generated the scare did not phrase it in those terms, mind you; they couched their alarmism in First Amendment language. In the late 1980s conservative commentators began warning of what they described as “the greatest threat to the First Amendment in our history” (Rush Limbaugh), “the equivalent of the Nazi brownshirt thought-control movement” (Walter Williams), and “an ideological virus as deadly as AIDS” (David Horowitz).<sup>20</sup>

President George Bush, in a commencement address at the University of Michigan in 1991, put the matter somewhat more soberly when he decried those who would “declare certain topics off-limits, certain expressions off-limits, even certain gestures off-limits.” Some professors and students were indeed urging that certain categories of statements and gestures be eradicated from university life. Specifically, they sought to do away with racist, sexist, and homophobic behavior. If anything qualifies as uncivil in a diverse society, they argued, it is precisely these sorts of acts.<sup>21</sup>

People who got chastised as PC were trying to create a more respectful and inclusive environment on campuses for groups that largely had been excluded—a goal that conservatives could not attack head-on lest they lose the already limited support they had in minority communities. Besides, far from being First Amendment absolutists themselves, many conservatives eagerly support restraints on a range of behaviors, from flag burning to the display of homoerotic

art. So rather than engage in honest debate with campus liberals and progressives, conservatives labeled them “politically correct.” Much the way their forebears had used the epithet “Communist” a few decades earlier, conservatives of the 1990s accused their enemies of being PC. Primarily by means of anecdotes retold time and again in political speeches, in the news media, and in popular books such as Dinesh D’Souza’s *Illiberal Education* and Roger Kimball’s *Tenured Radical*, they created an impression of armies of PC militants occupying the nation’s colleges and universities.<sup>22</sup>

Conservatives told, for instance, of a mob of 200 at the State University of New York at Binghamton who, armed with sticks and canes, invaded a lecture hall and threatened an elderly man who was giving a talk. According to pieces in the *Wall Street Journal* (one of them titled “The Return of the Storm Troopers”), the university’s president did nothing about the hooligans because college presidents “live in terror of being politically incorrect.”<sup>23</sup>

Then there was the story of a class at Harvard on feminist theory taught by Alice Jardine, a professor of French. According to Dinesh D’Souza, who sat in on the class one day, a student delivered “ribald one-liners about a man who lost his penis ... and brought loud and un-embarrassed laughter from the professor and other students.”<sup>24</sup>

Almost invariably, after such stories came out witnesses to the actual events debunked them. Participants at the Binghamton event, as well as a campus police investigator and one of the speakers, reported there had been no violence. The entire incident consisted, they said, of a single student who engaged in disruptive behavior for about four minutes, for which the university placed him on probation. About the class at Harvard, Alice Jardine subsequently explained that the discussion of the missing penis was actually about the myth of Osiris, a deity whose body parts were scattered throughout Egypt. Osiris's wife, Isis, buried each part as she found them. The phallus was never recovered; images of it, which are used in festivals, can be bought at tourist shops in Egypt.<sup>25</sup>

Yet information correcting the faulty reports came out mostly in academic books and journals, not in the mass media. The general public was left with a highly inaccurate image of white men being mercilessly jeered and muzzled at America's public and private universities.

Granted, activists from the political left sometimes behaved with impudence or intolerance. Speakers were shouted down on occasion if they were perceived as racist, sexist, or antigay. The sum of those occurrences did not support, however, a claim that "the delegitimization, even demonization, of the white male has reached extreme lengths," as Paul Craig Roberts of the Cato Institute, a conservative think tank, put it in an op-ed in the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1996.

Guilefully trading on the memory of the Holocaust, Roberts went on to assert that affronts to white males on college campuses are "comparable to ... the denunciation of Jewry by anti-Semites."<sup>26</sup>

Exaggerated assertions of that kind received more public notice than did the true patterns of discrimination and exclusion on U.S. campuses. Perhaps editors despaired of being called PC themselves if they ran the story, but there was an important story to be told. The data were rather shocking: on the eve of the twenty-first century women, blacks, and Hispanics, far from displacing white males in the professorate, mostly hold jobs at lower ranks and with lower pay. At the height of the PC scare, in the early and mid-1990s, women made up less than one-third of full-time faculty at American colleges and universities, a figure just slightly higher than in 1920, when women won the right to vote. Only about one in twenty professors was Hispanic or African American.

Research on students documented additional disturbing trends. Women and students of color often received less attention and encouragement in classrooms than did their white male counterparts, and outside of class they were the targets of tens of thousands of verbal and physical attacks each year. Gay and lesbian students likewise faced assaults, bigotry, and death threats. Even at famously liberal colleges gays and lesbians experienced prejudice. In a survey at Yale almost all gay and lesbian students said they had overheard antigay remarks, and one in four had been threatened. At

Oberlin College nearly half of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students said they have to censor themselves when discussing gay issues.

For faculty members in the meantime, to be openly gay or lesbian at many colleges was to risk being denied tenure, promotion, and opportunities to move into administrative positions, research showed.<sup>27</sup>

## Smoke Trumps Fire

The PC scare demonstrates how an orchestrated harangue can drown out a chorus of genuine concern. Faculty and students would raise questions about inequities at their schools only to find themselves made into *causes célèbres* of anti-PC fear mongering.

Imagine how surprised people must have been at Chico State University in 1996 and 1997, when just about every prominent conservative commentator took out after them. “Totalitarianism didn’t disappear with the collapse of the Soviet Union. It’s alive and well on many American college campuses today,” wrote Linda Chavez in a column in *USA Today* in reaction to an event at the previously unnoticed California school. Her comment was typical of the commentary by conservative essayists. Reading them, you would have thought that Chico State was under some sort of military occupation. The conservatives in fact were reacting to a one-word alteration in a help-wanted ad. “We are seeking a dynamic classroom teacher ... ,” the draft of an advertisement for a philosophy teacher had read. When a member of the university committee that reviews job ads questioned whether *dynamic* was the best word to describe the kind of teacher the program was actually seeking, the word was replaced by *excellent*. Some highly effective teachers do not have dynamic personal styles, the English professor had observed, and vice versa, some high-spirited teachers do not actually have much worthwhile knowledge. In addition, she suggested, the term *dynamic* may unintentionally discriminate against candidates from certain Asian and Hispanic backgrounds in which personal styles tend to be more unassuming.<sup>28</sup>

Just about everyone involved at Chico State had concurred with the editorial revision, yet in the months that followed the editing of the ad conservatives took every opportunity to assail the modification as PC degeneracy. “This episode typifies the sorry state of higher education today: Academes are so afraid of offending people that they’re afraid

to ask for strong teachers,” Debra Saunders, a columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, blasted without bothering to explain her assumption that excellent teachers are not strong. In San Francisco’s other paper, the Examiner, Paul Roberts of the Cato Institute suggested that the secret plan at Chico was to exclude white men from faculty positions. “All qualifications are restrictive, which explains their de-emphasis and the plight of overrepresented white males in our brave new world of equal outcomes,” Roberts wrote.<sup>29</sup>

By this point in the PC scare sense and sensibility had become optional. Once a pseudodanger becomes so familiar it ends up in the dictionary (not to say the title of a popular TV show hosted by comedian Bill Maher), argument and evidence are dispensable. Indeed, in the late 1990s some of the best-known conservative columnists, no longer feeling obliged to diagnose particular incidents of political correctness in any depth, simply threw out bunches of ostensible examples. George Will, in a piece disparaging what he called “sensitivity-soaked Chico,” went on to complain about an entry in a mail-order catalogue for kindling wood “felled by lightning or other natural causes.” Even mail-order companies have to act PC, Will bemoaned, “lest the friends of trees have their feelings hurt.” John Leo, of *U.S. News & World Report*, likewise included Chico in a laundry list of what he dubbed “p.c. crimes and misdemeanors.” His sardonic subhead—“Wanted: Lethargic New Teacher”—was rather mild compared to some others in the same column. Beneath the heading “Tired of Education? Try Gender Courses” Leo warned that “p.c. folk” have been “working to

replace useful college courses with dubious ones.” He cited as examples “The Politics of Dance Performance” offered at Swarthmore and “Christianity, Violence and Victimization” at Brown.<sup>30</sup>

Both Leo and Will banked on the improbability that anyone would look into their examples. The courses Leo cited did not replace other courses; they were added as electives. Nor did the courses represent dubious additions to the curriculum. A well-educated student of a particular art form ought to know something about its political dimensions, and the serious study of a religion necessarily includes attention to dishonorable as well as glorious moments in its history. As for the mail-order catalogue—the company was merely trying to make an unexceptional product sound special, a common practice in direct marketing.

## **Success Doesn’t Come Cheap**

If so many of their examples were untenable, how did conservatives engender such a successful scare? How did it come about that **politically correct**, a phrase hardly used in the media prior to Bush's speech in 1991, appeared in the nation's major newspapers and magazines more than 5,000 times a year in the mid-1900s? In 1997, the last year for which data were available, it appeared 7,200 times.<sup>31</sup>

The short but not incorrect answer is money. Behind the scenes millions of dollars were spent to generate that level of noise. Right-wing foundations such as Coors, Olin, and Bradley, along with corporate and individual contributors, provided funding for a national network of organizations: such think tanks as the Cato Institute and American Enterprise Institute; conservative college newspapers, including the *Dartmouth Review*, where Dinesh D'Souza got his start; magazines such as William F. Buckley's *National Review* and David Horowitz's *Heterodoxy*; and faculty groups, most notably the National Association of Scholars. With an annual budget in the vicinity of \$1 million, the NAS had the wherewithal to provide politicians and the press with an unending supply of sound bites, anecdotes, and op-eds.<sup>32</sup>

In an article in *Skeptic* magazine on what he termed "the great p.c. conspiracy hoax" Brian Siano of the University of Pennsylvania compared the strategies of the NAS to a national magazine that asks its readers to send in accounts of psychic experiences or sightings of flying saucers. Such a request would inevitably produce loads of testimonials. "One might be able to debunk one or two accounts, but the rest of this database would remain 'unchallenged,' to be trotted

out by the faithful as often as possible," Siano suggests. "Now imagine," he adds, "if you could spend a half dozen years and millions of dollars on such a project."<sup>33</sup>

Siano's comparison is apt. The NAS continually collected reports of political correctness gone amiss, packaged the best, and peddled them to the media. Anyone who dared challenge the reports quickly discovered the power of NAS's home-court advantage. In 1996 after *USA Today* quoted an NAS official's assertion that Georgetown University, as part of a general "dumbing down" of its curriculum, had decided to drop Shakespeare as a requirement for English majors, the dean at Georgetown responded that the school was doing nothing of the sort. Georgetown's curriculum for English majors includes more, not fewer, Shakespeare classes than in the past, he pointed out. Moreover, regardless of their major, all Georgetown students must complete twelve courses of general-education requirements, including two literature courses. This factual information from the dean did not appear, though, in the news story, but only later, in a letter-to-the-editor column.<sup>34</sup>

When Robert Brustein, artistic director of the American Repertory Theater, picked up on NAS rhetoric and proclaimed that "most English departments are now held so completely hostage to fashionable political and theoretical agendas that it is unlikely Shakespeare can qualify as an appropriate author," journalists found the quote too juicy to resist. The image appeared widely in the press of PC thugs in ivory towers forcibly evicting the Bard. But when John



Wilson, a graduate student at the University of Chicago, suspicious of the claim, consulted data from the Modern Language Association, he discovered that fully 97 percent of English departments at four-year colleges offered at least one course on Shakespeare. Almost two-thirds, he learned, required English majors to take a Shakespeare course. In the MLA's on-line bibliography, Shakespeare received nearly 20,000 entries—more than three times the next runner-up (James Joyce), and thirty-six times as many as Toni Morrison, reported Wilson.<sup>35</sup> Wilson's correction to the NAS and Brustein et al. appeared, however, in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the equivalent of a trade magazine.

To the extent that great literary works were being withheld from America's youth, PC forces were seldom to blame. The real censors, though they received scant attention, were people like the school superintendent in Maryland who banned Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* in 1997 after some parents called the classic of African-American literature "trash" and "anti-white." And they were conservatives in the U.S. Congress and state legislatures. "The real danger to Shakespeare," Katha Pollitt accurately noted in *The Nation*, "is not that he will cease to be compulsory at elite colleges like Georgetown but that he will cease to be made available and accessible to a broad range of students." Throughout the 1980s and 1990s conservatives slashed budgets at the National Endowment for the Humanities, the U.S. Department of Education, and other public programs. Among the unfortunate results of those reductions in funding, such places as the Shakespeare Theater in Washington, Shakespeare and Company in Massachusetts, and the Folger Shakespeare Library had to curtail programs that train teachers and reach wide audiences.<sup>36</sup>

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Conservative politicians had whipped up popular support for such cuts in the first place by—you guessed it—portraying the public agencies as hotbeds of political correctness.

## One Scare Supports Another

Once a scare catches on, not only do its advocates have the offensive advantage, as the Shakespeare follies illustrate, but they can also use the scare as a defensive weapon in other disputes. This chapter concludes with an important case in point, in which the PC label was actually used to countermand a scientific fact.

Anyone who commuted by bus or train in the Washington, D.C., area during the mid-1990s or sought an abortion in the South in that period will probably remember this fear campaign. More than one thousand advertisements appeared in buses and subway stations around Washington and Baltimore alluding to a scary statistic: "Women who choose

abortion suffer more and deadlier breast cancer.” In Louisiana and Mississippi legislators passed laws that require doctors to inform women twenty-four hours before an abortion that the procedure can increase their risk of breast cancer.<sup>37</sup>

Some antiabortion activists had been pushing the point since the early 1980s, when it first became apparent that as the number of abortions rose in the years after 1973, when the procedure became legal, rates of breast cancer also increased. Not until 1994, however, did the news media pay much attention to proliferators’ fear mongering. That year, *the Journal of the National Cancer Institute* published an article in which researchers estimated that having an abortion might raise a woman’s risk of breast cancer by 50 percent.<sup>38</sup>

To their credit, journalists were circumspect about the study. In contrast to coverage of some other pseudodangers (road rage among them), the news media generally did an excellent job of putting in perspective the 50 percent figure. Reporters noted that other studies had found no increased risk, and that even if future research confirmed the figure, the import would be minimal for most women considering abortion. A 50 percent increased risk may sound large, but in epidemiologic terms it is not. It does not mean that if all women had abortions, half again as many would develop breast cancer; rather, it means that a woman’s lifetime risk goes up by 50 percent. If she had a 10 percent probability of developing breast cancer, abortion would raise it to 15 percent. Heavy smoking, by comparison, increases the risk of

developing lung cancer by 3,000 percent. Some studies suggest that living in a city or drinking one glass of alcohol a day raises the risk of breast cancer by greater than 50 percent.<sup>39</sup>

Reporters generally did a laudable job the following year as well, when anti-abortion groups heralded two more studies. One estimated a 30 percent increased risk of breast cancer for women who have abortions; the other put the figure at 23 percent. Journalists explained that both studies suffered, as had earlier research, from a potential reporting bias that could substantially skew their results. They quoted the lead researcher on one of the studies, the epidemiologist Polly Newcomb of the Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, who noted that women battling breast cancer might be more likely than others to inform researchers that they had had abortions. Cancer patients are more accustomed to giving full and accurate medical histories, Newcomb suggested, and they are searching themselves for an explanation for their illness.<sup>40</sup>

Strikingly, the lead researcher on the other study in 1995, an endocrinologist at Baruch College named Joel Brind, offered no such caveats. On the contrary, he told CNN, “The evidence is quite clear, in fact, it should have been out long ago.” Brind advocated that every woman considering abortion be informed of the potential increased risk of breast cancer. When reporters checked into Brind’s background, however, they learned that he is an antiabortion activist who contributes frequently to newsletters and web sites published by prolife groups. Richard Knox of the *Boston Globe*

reported that Brind told him he had conducted the study specifically to provide legislators with justification for requiring doctors to warn women about a cancer risk.<sup>41</sup>

With Brind as their medical mouthpiece, antiabortion groups intensified their scare drive throughout 1995 and 1996. Some persisted even after a massive study published in 1997 in the *New England Journal of Medicine* showed that the earlier research had been flawed in precisely the ways Polly Newcomb and other experts suspected. Conducted by epidemiologists from the University of Copenhagen, the later study relied not on self-reports but on data produced through the mandatory registration in Denmark of births, cancer cases, and abortions. The scientists were able to compare 281,000 women who had had abortions with 1.2 million others who had not. They determined that neither group was more likely to develop breast cancer.<sup>42</sup>

Joel Brind's rejoinder when a reporter from the *Washington Post* asked him to comment on the study? "This is an apparently large and powerful study with the politically correct result that is not scientifically correct," Brind said. At once reinforcing the PC scare and using it to defend another misbegotten terror, Brind vowed to continue his campaign of fear.<sup>43</sup>

## CRIME IN THE NEWS

### Tall Tales and Overstated Statistics

If the mystery about baseless scares is how they are sold to a public that has real dangers to worry about, in the case of more defensible fears the question is somewhat different. We *ought* to have concerns about crime, drug addiction, child abuse, and other afflictions to be discussed. The question is, how have we gotten so mixed up about the true nature and extent of these problems?

In no small measure the answer lies in stories like one that broke on March 19, 1991. If you read a newspaper or turned on a TV or radio newscast that day or the several days thereafter you were told that the streets of America were more dangerous than a war zone.

The press had been provoked to make this extreme assertion not by a rise in violent crime but by a dramatic event. The Gulf War had just ended, and a soldier who returned home to Detroit had been shot dead outside his apartment building.

The front-page story in the *Washington Post* portrayed the situation this way:

Conley Street, on this city's northeast side, is a pleasant-looking row of brick and wood homes with small, neat lawns, a street that for years was the realization of the American dream for middle-income families. But in the past few years, Conley has become a street of crack, crime and occasional bursts of gunfire. And at 2:15 a.m. Monday, the bullets killed Army Spec. Anthony Riggs, something that all of Iraq's Scud missiles could not do during his seven months with a Patriot missile battery in Saudi Arabia.

Described by his mother as a man who deeply loved his family and his country, Riggs had written home from Saudi Arabia, "There's no way I'm going to die in this rotten country. With the Lord's grace and his guidance, I'll walk American soil once again." But before that letter even arrived, while Riggs was moving his wife and three-year-old daughter to a new apartment, five shots rang out and witnesses heard the sound of screeching tires. Some faceless thug had killed him just to get his car. "His wife, Toni, found him dying in a gutter," the *Post* reported.<sup>1</sup>

TV newscasts showed Mrs. Riggs sobbing. She had warned her husband that there had been a shooting on the street earlier in the day, but he wouldn't listen. "He said he'd just got back from having missiles flying over his head, and a few

shots weren't going to bother him," according to Toni's aunt, quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*. That of course was the larger point, or as the *Post* put it, "Riggs's death was a tragic reminder of President Bush's words recently when he announced a new crime bill: 'Our veterans deserve to come home to an America where it is safe to walk the streets'."<sup>2</sup>

## Oops, Wrong Story

From the point of view of journalists and editors an ideal crime story—that is, the sort that deserves major play and is sure to hold readers' and viewers' attention—has several elements that distinguish it from other acts of violence. The victims are innocent, likable people; the perpetrator is an uncaring brute. Details of the crime, while shocking, are easy to relay. And the events have social significance, bespeaking an underlying societal crisis.

The murder of Anthony Riggs seemed to have it all. The only problem was, very little of this perfect crime story was true. Reporters named the right victim but the wrong perpetrator, motive, and moral.

It was the massive media attention, ironically, that resulted in the real story coming out. Confronted with demands from politicians and citizen groups to catch Riggs's killer, the Detroit police launched an all-out investigation. While digging through garbage cans around the Conley Street neighborhood, an officer came upon a handgun that turned out to belong to Michael Cato, the brother of Riggs's wife, Toni. Nineteen years old at the time and currently serving a life sentence for murder, Michael said in a confession that his sister had promised him a share of \$175,000 in life insurance benefits.

Reporters cannot be blamed for failing to possess this information prior to its discovery by the police, but had they been a little skeptical or made a few phone calls they almost certainly would have stumbled on at least some aspects of the truth. They might have learned, for example, that Toni had been making noises about dumping Anthony for some time, or that it was she who arranged a hefty life insurance policy for her husband before he went off to war. Reporters might also have checked into Mrs. Riggs's past and discovered previous irregularities, such as the fact that she had not yet divorced her previous husband when she married Anthony.

Journalists also might have discovered the existence of a letter Riggs wrote to his mother from Saudi Arabia. “Toni has wrecked my car. She is now bouncing checks.... She is never home: 2:30 A.M., 4 A.M.... I would put my head through the neck of a hot sauce bottle to please her, but now I need happiness in return,” *People* magazine, the only major publication that subsequently ran a full-fledged account of the true story, quoted him penning.<sup>3</sup>

Had news writers checked with knowledgeable criminologists or homicide detectives they might have been impressed as well by the improbability of a car thief murdering someone execution-style when a simple shot or two would have done the job. Carjacking victims seldom get shot at all, particularly if they do not resist.<sup>4</sup>

Journalists generally pride themselves on being suspicious about information they are given. Your average journalist “wears his skepticism like a medieval knight wore his armor,” Shelby Coffey, head of ABC News and former editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, has said. Yet when it comes to a great crime story, a journalist will behave like the high school nerd who has been approached by the most popular girl in school for help with her science project. Grateful for the opportunity, he doesn’t bother to ask a lot of questions.<sup>5</sup>

There are discernible differences, though, between reporters for electronic versus print media. Unlike their colleagues at local television stations, who will go for any story that includes a police chase or a humiliated celebrity,

journalists at newspapers and magazines have a particular fondness for crime stories that help them make sense of some other phenomenon they are having trouble covering in its own right. In the Riggs murder the phenomenon in question was the Gulf War. The news media had difficulty reporting accurately on the war because the Pentagon kept the press away from the action and used tightly scripted briefings to spoonfeed only what the generals and the president wanted known. As part of that spin Generals Colin Powell and Norman Schwarzkopf were defined as the war’s heroes. Grunts on the battlefield and in the air seemed almost irrelevant to a war fought with smart bombs. Their homecoming consequently had little intrinsic meaning or news value. So when the Riggs murder came along, reporters eagerly used it to mark the end of the war on Iraq and the start of the next phase in the ongoing domestic war on crime.<sup>6</sup>

## Oops, Wrong Crisis

If the news media merely got the facts wrong about an occasional homicide, that would be no big deal. But the significance they attach to many of the homicides and other violent crimes they choose to spotlight is another matter. The streets of America are not more dangerous than a war zone, and the media should not convey that they are.

Some places journalists have declared crime ridden are actually quite safe. Consider an article *Time* magazine ran in April 1994 headlined across the top of two pages: “Not a month goes by without an outburst of violence in the workplace—now even in flower nurseries, pizza parlors and law offices.” One of literally thousands of stories published and broadcast on what was dubbed “the epidemic of workplace violence,” *Time*’s article presented a smorgasbord of grisly photographs and vignettes of unsuspecting workers and managers brutally attacked by their coworkers or employees. “Even Americans who see a potential for violence almost everywhere like to suppose there are a few sanctuaries left. One is a desk, or a spot behind the counter, or a place on the assembly line,” the writer sighed.<sup>7</sup>

More than five hundred stories about workplace violence appeared in newspapers alone just during 1994 and 1995, and many included some seriously scary statistics: 2.2 million people attacked on the job each year, murder the leading cause of work-related death for women, the number-three cause for men. “How can you be sure,” asked a reporter for the *St. Petersburg Times*, “the person sitting next to you at work won’t go over the edge and bring an Uzi to the office tomorrow?” Her answer was, “You can’t.”<sup>8</sup>

At least one journalist, however, grew leery of his colleagues’ fear mongering. Erik Larson, a staff reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, having come upon the same numbers quoted time and again, decided to take a closer look. The result was an expose in the *Journal* titled “A False Crisis,” in which Larson revealed how the news media had created an epidemic where none existed. Of about 121 million working people, about 1,000 are murdered on the job each year, a rate of just 1 in 114,000. Police, security guards, taxi drivers, and other particularly vulnerable workers account for a large portion of these deaths. Cab drivers, for instance, suffer an occupational homicide rate twenty-one times the national average. On the flip side of that coin, people in certain other occupations face conspicuously low levels of risk. The murder rate for doctors, engineers, and other professionals is about 1 in 457,000, Larson determined.<sup>9</sup>

Another vocational group with relatively low rates, it turns out, is postal workers. The expression “going postal” became part of the American vernacular after some particularly bloody assaults by U.S. Postal Service employees against their supervisors. Yet postal employees are actually about two and a half times *less* likely than the average worker to be killed on the job.<sup>10</sup>

All in all fewer than one in twenty homicides occurs at a workplace. And while most of the media hoopla has been about disgruntled workers killing one another or their bosses—the Uzi-toting fellow at the next desk—few workplace murders are actually carried out by coworkers or ex-workers. About 90 percent of murders at workplaces are committed

by outsiders who come to rob. The odds of being killed by someone you work with or employ are less than 1 in 2 million; you are several times more likely to be hit by lightning.<sup>11</sup>

Larson deconstructed as well the survey that produced the relentlessly reproduced statistic of 2.2 million people assaulted at work each year. Most of the reported attacks were fairly minor and did not involve weapons, and once again, the great majority were committed by outsiders, not by coworkers, ex-employees, or bosses. What is more, the survey from which the number comes would not pass muster among social scientists, Larson points out. The response rate is too low. Fewer than half of the people contacted responded to the survey, making it likely that those who participated were not typical of employed Americans as a whole.<sup>12</sup>

Given that workplace violence is far from pandemic, why were journalists so inclined to write about it? Perhaps because workplace violence is a way of talking about the precariousness of employment without directly confronting what primarily put workers at risk—the endless waves of corporate layoffs that began in the early 1980s. Stories about workplace violence routinely made mention of corporate downsizing as one potential cause, but they did not treat mass corporate firing as a social ill in its own right. To have done so would have proven difficult for many journalists. For one thing, whom would they have cast as the villain of the piece? Is the CEO who receives a multimillion dollar raise for firing tens of thousands of employees truly evil? Or is he merely making his company more competitive in the global

economy? And how would a journalist's boss—or boss's boss at the media conglomerate that owns the newspaper or network—feel about publishing implicit criticism of something they themselves have done? Pink slips arrived with regularity in newsrooms like everywhere else in corporate America in recent years, and they didn't exactly inspire reporters to do investigative pieces about downsizing.<sup>13</sup>

To its great credit, the *New York Times* did eventually run an excellent series of articles on downsizing in 1996. In one of the articles the authors noted off-handedly and without pursuing the point that about 50 percent more people are laid off each year than are victims of crime. It is an important comparison. From 1980 through 1995 more than 42 million jobs were eliminated in the United States. The number of jobs lost per year more than doubled over that time, from about 1.5 million in 1980 to 3.25 million in 1995. By comparison, during that same period most crime rates—including those for violent crimes—declined. A working person was roughly four to five times more likely to be the victim of a layoff in any given year than to be the victim of a violent crime committed by a stranger.<sup>14</sup>

For many, job loss is every bit as disabling and demoralizing as being the victim of a crime. You can lose your home, your health insurance, your self-esteem, your sense of security, and your willingness to report harassment or hazardous working conditions at your next place of employment. During the economic boom of the late 1990s layoffs occurred at an even higher rate than in the 1980s. In what former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich dubbed “down-waging” and



“down-benefiting,” highly profitable companies replaced full-time workers with part-timers, temps, and lower-paid full-timers, and they subcontracted work to firms that paid lower wages and provided poorer benefits. Yet throughout the past two decades the news media printed and broadcast exponentially more stories about crime. In the early and mid-1990s 20 to 30 percent of news items in city newspapers concerned crime, and close to half of the news coverage on local television newscasts was about crime.<sup>15</sup>

## Unhappy Halloween

Workplace violence was not the first false crime crisis used by journalists as a roundabout way to talk about other matters they found difficult to address directly. Even the *New York Times* has been known to engage in the practice.

“Those Halloween goodies that children collect this weekend on their rounds of ‘trick or treating’ may bring them more horror than happiness,” began a story in the *Times* in October 1970 that launched a long-running crime panic. “Take, for example,” the reporter continued, “that plump red apple that Junior gets from a kindly old woman down the block. It may have a razor blade hidden inside. The chocolate ‘candy’ bar may be a laxative, the bubble gum may be sprinkled with lye, the popcorn balls may be coated with camphor, the candy may turn out to be packets containing sleeping pills.”<sup>16</sup>

Similar articles followed in the nation’s news media every autumn for years to come. In 1975 *Newsweek* reported in its edition that hit newsstands at the end of October, “If this year’s Halloween follows form, a few children will return home with something more than an upset tummy: in recent years, several children have died and hundreds have narrowly escaped injury from razor blades, sewing needles and shards of glass purposefully put into their goodies by adults.”<sup>17</sup>

In her columns of the mid- and late 1980s even “Dear Abby” was reminding parents around trick-or-treat time that “somebody’s child will become violently ill or die after eating poisoned candy or an apple containing a razor blade.” An *ABC News/Washington Post* poll in 1985 showed that 60 percent of parents feared their kids could become victims.<sup>18</sup>

This time no journalist stepped forward to correct the media's and public's collective fantasy, even though, as Jan Harold Brunvand, the folklorist and author observed, "it's hard to imagine how someone could shove a blade into a fruit without injuring himself. And wouldn't the damage done to the apple by such a process make it obvious that something was wrong with it?"<sup>19</sup>

The myth of Halloween bogeymen and bogeywomen might never have been exposed had not a sociologist named Joel Best become sufficiently leery that he undertook an examination of every reported incident since 1958. Best, currently a professor at the University of Southern Illinois, established in a scholarly article in 1985 that there has not been a single death or serious injury. He uncovered a few incidents where children received minor cuts from sharp objects in their candy bags, but the vast majority of reports turned out to be old-fashioned hoaxes, sometimes enacted by young pranksters, other times by parents hoping to make money in lawsuits or insurance scams.<sup>20</sup>

Ironically, in the only two known cases where children apparently did die from poisoned Halloween candy, the myth of the anonymous, sadistic stranger was used to cover up the real crime. In the first incident family members sprinkled heroin on a five-year-old's Halloween candy in hopes of fooling the police about the cause of the child's death. Actually, the boy had found and eaten heroin in his uncle's home. In the second incident a boy died after eating cyanide-poisoned candy on Halloween, but police determined that his father had spiked the candy to collect insurance money. Bill Ellis, a

professor of English at Penn State University, has commented that both of these incidents, reported in the press at first as stranger murders, "reinforced the moral of having parents examine treats—ironically, because in both cases family members were responsible for the children's deaths!"<sup>21</sup>

Yet if anonymous Halloween sadists were fictitious creatures, they were useful diversions from some truly frightening realities, such as the fact that far more children are seriously injured and killed by family members than by strangers. Halloween sadists also served in news stories as evidence that particular social trends were having ill effects on the populace. A psychiatrist quoted in the *New York Times* article held that Halloween sadism was a by-product of "the permissiveness in today's society." The candy poisoner him- or herself was not directly to blame, the doctor suggested. The real villains were elsewhere. "The people who give harmful treats to children see criminals and students in campus riots getting away with things," the *Times* quoted him, "so they think they can get away with it, too."<sup>22</sup>

In many of these articles the choice of hero also suggests that other social issues are surreptitiously being discussed. At a time when divorce rates were high and rising, and women were leaving home in great numbers to take jobs, news stories heralded women who represented the antithesis of those trends—full-time housewives and employed moms who returned early from work to throw safe trick-or-treat parties for their children and their children's friends in their homes or churches, or simply to escort their kids on their rounds and inspect the treats.<sup>23</sup>

# Kiddie Porn and Cyberpredators

The Halloween tales were forerunners of what grew into a media staple of the last quarter of the twentieth century: crime stories in which innocent children fall victim to seemingly innocuous adults who are really perverts. The villains take several familiar forms, two of the more common being the child pornographer and his or her pedophile customers.

A report on NBC News in 1977 let it be known that “as many as two million American youngsters are involved in the fast-growing, multi-million dollar child-pornography business”—a statement that subsequent research by criminologists and law enforcement authorities determined to be wrong on every count. Kiddie porn probably grossed less than \$1 million a year (in contrast to the multibillion dollar adult industry), and hundreds, not millions, of American children were involved. Once again, facts were beside the point. The child pornographer represented, as columnist Ellen Goodman observed at the time, an “unequivocal villain” whom reporters and readers found “refreshingly uncomplicated.” Unlike other pornographers, whose exploits raise tricky First Amendment issues, child pornographers made for good, simple, attention-grabbing copy.<sup>24</sup>

A conspicuous subtext in coverage during the late 1970s and 1980s was adult guilt and anxiety about the increasing tendency to turn over more of children’s care to strangers. Raymond Buckey and Peggy Buckey McMartin, proprietors of the McMartin Preschool in Manhattan Beach, California, were the most famous alleged child pornographers of the era. Their prosecution in the mid-1980s attracted a level of media hoopla unsurpassed until O. J. Simpson’s double-murder trial nearly a decade later, and from the start they were depicted as pedophiles and child pornographers. The local TV news reporter who first broke the McMartin story declared in his initial report that children had been “made to appear in pornographic films while in the preschool’s care.” The media later quoted officials from the district attorney’s office, making statements about “millions of child pornography photographs and films” at the school.<sup>25</sup>

Not a single pornographic photograph taken at the McMartin School has ever been produced, despite handsome offers of reward money and vast international police investigations. Yet thanks to the media coverage, when social scientists from Duke University conducted a survey in 1986, four out of five people said they believed that Raymond Buckey was part of a child pornography ring.<sup>26</sup>

In more recent years child pornographers and pedophiles have come in handy for fear mongering about the latest variety of baby-sitter : the Internet. In the 1990s politicians and the news media have made much of the existence of pedophilia in cyberspace. Speaking in 1998 on behalf of legislation he drafted that makes it easier to convict

“cyberpredators” and imprison them longer, Representative Bill McCollum of Florida made the customary claim: “Sex offenders who prey on children no longer need to hang out in parks or malls or school yards.” Nowadays, warned McCollum, child pornographers and pedophiles are just “a mouse click away” from their young prey.<sup>27</sup>

This time the panic did not rely so much on suspicious statistics as on peculiar logic. With few cases of youngsters having been photographed or attacked by people who located them on-line, fear mongers found it more convenient simply to presume that “as the number of children who use the Internet continues to boom ... pornography and pedophilia grow along with it” (*New York Times*). Reporters portrayed the inhabitants of cyberspace, children and adults alike, in somewhat contradictory ways. About the kids they said, on the one hand, “Internet-savvy children can also easily access on-line pornography” (*New York Times*). On the other hand, reporters depicted computer-proficient kids as precisely the *opposite* of savvy. They described them as defenseless against pedophiles and child pornographers in cyberspace. “Depraved people are reaching right into your home and touching your child,” Hugh Downs told viewers of ABC’s “20/20.”<sup>28</sup>

To judge from reports by some of the people featured in news reports, cyberspace was largely devoid of other adults who could protect children from these creeps. The Internet is “a city with no cops,” the *New York Times* quoted a district attorney from Suffolk County, even though law enforcement officials actually do a great deal of lurking and

entrapping. Since 1993 the FBI has conducted an operation code-named “Innocent Images” in which agents assume false identities and post seductive messages on the Internet and on-line services. In one of the more highly publicized busts that resulted from the operation, a thirty-one-year-old Washington, D.C., attorney was arrested when he showed up at a shopping mall to meet a fourteen-year-old girl whom he had propositioned on-line for sex. In reality he had been corresponding with an adult FBI agent who had assumed a provocative on-line name—“One4fun4u”—and had sent the man messages stating that she’d had experience with an older man and “it was a lot of fun.” In another arrest, a fifty-eight-year-old man was snagged by agents who used the names “Horny15bi” and “Sexcolletr” and described themselves on-line as “dreaming of kinky sex.” One of them gave as her motto, “vice is nice but incest is best.”<sup>29</sup>

Cyberspace has been policed by other adults as well. Reporters for newspapers and television stations, posing as young teens or preteens, have responded to solicitations for sex, only to arrive at the agreed-on meeting place with cameras and cops in tow. Groups with names like “Cyber Angels” and “Safeguarding Our Children” collect information on pedophiles via e-mail from children who say they have been approached or molested. Members of adult vigilante groups make it a practice to disrupt Internet chat rooms where child pornography is traded and pass along information to police.<sup>30</sup>

While judicial experts continue to debate which of these intervention strategies constitute entrapment or invasion of privacy, there is an extralegal question as well. David L. Sobel, an attorney with the Electronic Privacy Information Center, framed the question succinctly. “Are we making the world a better place,” he asked rhetorically, “by tempting some of these people to commit crimes they may not have otherwise committed?”<sup>31</sup>

Subtract from the battery of accounts in news stories all instances where the “children” lured out of cyberspace were actually undercover adults, and what remains? Several of the most widely covered incidents involving real children turn out to be considerably more ambiguous than they seem on first hearing. Take for instance the murder of eleven-year-old Eddie Werner in a suburb in New Jersey in 1997. Defined in the media as the work of a “Cyber Psycho” (*New York Post* headline) and proof that the Internet is, as an advocacy group put it, “a playground for pedophiles,” the killing actually bore only a tertiary connection to the Net. Eddie Werner had not been lured on-line. He was killed while selling holiday items door to door for the local PTA. Reporters and activists made the link to the Internet by way of Werner’s killer, Sam Manzie, a fifteen-year-old who had been having sex in motel rooms throughout the previous year with a middle-aged man he had met in a chat room.

In an essay critical of the reporting about the Werner murder Newsweek writer Steven Levy correctly pointed out: “Cyberspace may not be totally benign, but in some respects it has it all over the often overrated real world. After all,

one could argue, if young Eddie Werner had been selling his candy and gift-wrapping paper on the Internet, and not door to door, tragedy might not have struck.”<sup>32</sup>

In that same vein, consider a suspenseful yarn that took up much of the space in a front-page piece in the *Los Angeles Times* entitled “Youngsters Falling Prey to Seducers in Computer Web Crime.” It was about a fifteen-year-old whose parents found him missing. Using the boy’s America Online account, they discovered that he had been sent a bus ticket to visit a man with whom he had communicated by e-mail. The parents frantically sent messages of their own to the man. “Daniel is a virgin,” one of the parents’ outgoing messages said. “Oh, no, he’s not,” came back the chilling reply. Yet when the reporter gets to the conclusion of Daniel’s saga it’s something of an anticlimax. The teenager returned home and informed his parents he had not been harmed by his e-mail companion, who was only a little older than Daniel himself. Nonetheless, the moral of Daniel’s story was, according to the *Los Angeles Times* reporter: “Such are the frightening new frontiers of cyberspace, a place where the child thought safely tucked away in his or her own room may be in greater danger than anyone could imagine.”<sup>33</sup>

Now *there’s* a misleading message. For those children most at risk of sexual abuse, to be left alone in their rooms with a computer would be a godsend. It is poor children—few of whom have America Online connections—who are disproportionately abused, and it is in children’s own homes and those of close relatives that sexual abuse commonly

occurs. In focusing on creeps in cyberspace, reporters neatly skirt these vital facts and the discomfoting issues they raise.<sup>34</sup>

## Raw Numbers and Pedophile Priests

The news media have misled public consciousness all the more through their voracious coverage of pedophiles in another place that many Americans privately distrust and consider mysterious—the Catholic Church.

John Dreese, a priest of the diocese of Columbus, Ohio, justifiably complained that a generation of Catholic clergy find their “lifetimes of service, fairly faithful for the great majority, are now tarnished and besmirched by the constant drone of the TV reporting.” Writing in *Commonweal*, the independently published Catholic magazine, Dreese acknowledged that some of his fellow priests abuse children, and he decried the bishops who let them get away with it.

But the media, Dreese argues, “seem more and more ideological. ‘Roman Catholic priest’ or ‘Father’ are consistently used in their reporting. Rarely is the generic term of minister or simply, priest, used. Shots of the inside of a Roman Catholic church, of angelic altar boys in cassocks and surplices, and first communicants dressed in pure white dramatically highlight the bold betrayal of this crime.”<sup>35</sup>

Asks Dreese, “Is this responsible reporting, is it sensationalism, or is it Catholic bashing?” It is a question that warrants serious consideration by reporters and editors who have been much too accepting of evidence of “epidemics” of priestly pedophilia. The media paid considerable attention, for example, to pronouncements from Andrew M. Greeley, a priest best known as the author of best-selling potboilers, including *FallfromGrace*, a 1993 novel about a priest who rapes preadolescent boys. Although Greeley holds a professorship in the social sciences at the University of Chicago, his statements on pedophiles in the priesthood oddly conflict with one another and with principles of statistical reasoning to which he subscribes in other contexts. “If Catholic clerics feel that charges of pedophilia have created an open season on them,” he wrote in an op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, “they have only themselves to blame. By their own inaction and indifference they have created an open season on children for the few sexual predators among them.” Yet in a Jesuit magazine Greeley declared that the number of pedophile priests is far more than just a “few”. There he estimated that 2,000 to 4,000 Roman Catholic clergy—between 4 and 8 percent of the total—had abused more than 100,000 young people.<sup>36</sup>

These shocking statistics, dutifully publicized in the press, were unreliable to say the least. Greeley extrapolated the number of pedophile priests based on rough estimates from the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago, which based them on their own internal study, which may or may not have been accurate, and in any event, might not have generalized to clergy nationwide. As for the figure of 100,000 victims, Greeley came up with this estimate on the basis of studies of child molesters outside the priesthood that suggest that active pedophiles victimize dozens if not hundreds of children each. Yet these studies are themselves controversial because they rely on self-reports from men who were apprehended by the police—men who might molest more children than other pedophiles or exaggerate their exploits.<sup>37</sup>

Greeley's critics suggest he exaggerated the number of pedophiles and victims by something like a factor of ten. But whatever the true incidence, the amount of ink and airtime devoted to pedophile priests clearly has created a climate in which, on the one hand, the church has reason to disavow true claims, and on the other, con artists have leverage to bring false claims. Attorneys who specialize in bringing suits against the church and have collected multimillion dollar settlements say they see large numbers of false claims.<sup>38</sup>

The political essayist Walter Russell Mead pointed out a more subtle disservice of the media's focus. In reporting on perverted priests journalists presumably believe they are raising a larger issue about the moral collapse of one of humankind's oldest and most influential spiritual institutions. As Mead points out, however, obsessive attention to

pedophile priests obscures more far-reaching problems of the church. He cites in particular corruption in political parties the church has supported in Europe, and a loss of membership in various parts of the world. These trends are considerably more difficult for the press to cover, especially in a manner that audiences will find interesting. Yet they are far more pertinent indicators of the decline and corruption of the church than are pedophile priests. "After all, the church does not teach that its clergy are saints—just the opposite," notes Mead. "Sin is with us every day, says the Catholic Church, and it deliberately teaches that the efficacy of its sacraments and the accuracy of its teachings are independent of the moral failings of its bishops and priests. From a certain point of view, the sex scandals don't so much disprove the Christian faith as confirm our need for it."<sup>39</sup>

## **Strange and Sinister Men**

In my review of news stories about crimes against children I have been struck by the frequency with which journalists draw unsubstantiated conclusions about the pedophilic tendencies of individuals and whole classes of people.

When a man named Thomas Hamilton gunned down sixteen elementary school children, their teacher, and himself in tiny Dunblane, Scotland, in March 1996, the event took center stage in the American news media, much of which portrayed Hamilton as one in a large but nearly invisible breed of child predators, any of whom might, without warning, go out and massacre children. “The villain, all too predictably, was an embittered loner and suspected pedophile,” wrote *Newsweek*. “He was,” a columnist for the magazine said in an accompanying piece, “a slightly elderly, crazed version of the social category that now menaces our societies more than any other: the single male who has no hope.”<sup>40</sup>

The columnist offered up no evidence in support of this slur against solitary bachelors. He would be hard pressed to do so, in particular with regard to the danger they pose to women and children. Married men, having greater access to these groups, commit the lion’s share of violence against them. The pedophile connection is also tenuous. Child murderers may be suspected pedophiles, but only a small number are confirmed or confessed pedophiles. In the case of Thomas Hamilton, most major news outlets hinted at his pedophilia or quoted townspeople who asserted it outright, but on the basis of blatantly weak evidence. As a Reuters news agency story noted, “What really bothered people were

the pictures, often showing boys stripped to the waist for physical activity—nothing sinister in that, but unsettling, neighbors and acquaintances said.”<sup>41</sup>

Reuters’s story on Hamilton was more balanced than many. Other print and broadcast journalists let audiences make what they would of the fact that Hamilton had been kicked out of his post as a scout leader for “inappropriate behavior.” Reuters disclosed that, according to the scouting association itself, he had been sacked not for child molesting but for incompetence.<sup>42</sup>

Another interesting fact came out in *People* magazine. Although *People*’s reporters made much of Hamilton’s “penchant for photographing boys bare-chested,” they let it be known that when town officials shut down a boys’ club Hamilton had started, seventy parents and forty-five boys signed a petition saying he had great talent and integrity. “We are all proud to have Mr. Hamilton in charge of our boys,” the petition declared. Hamilton himself, in a letter he sent to the news media just before his killing spree, professed he was “not a pervert” and insinuated that it was whispers to the contrary around Dunblane that had driven him to his heinous act.<sup>43</sup>

Still, in their stories about him some journalists were no better than the small-town gossips. They rekindled age-old prejudices linking homosexuality and pedophilia. *Newsweek* ran a sidebar titled “Strange and Sinister,” which consisted



of a photograph of Hamilton standing beside a boy (fully clothed) and allegations that he was a pedophile who had been caught by police “in a gay red-light district” in Edinburgh “in a compromising position.”<sup>44</sup>

Homophobia is a recurring element in journalists’ coverage of mass murderers. Research by Philip Jenkins, a professor of history and religious studies at Penn State University, shows that the media routinely emphasize the supposed homosexuality and pedophilia of men who commit multiple murders. News stories over the past quarter century about Randy Kraft, Westley Alan Dodd, John Wayne Gacy, Jeffrey Dahmer, and assorted other killers included phrases like “homosexual homicide horror” and “homosexual sadist.” As Jenkins notes, “Emphasizing that such individuals were gay serial killers tended to confound homosexuals with pedophiles and to support contemporary claims that homosexuality represented a physical and moral threat to children.”<sup>45</sup>

Studies of pedophiles solidly refute such claims, of course. One recent study published in the medical journal *Pediatrics* indicates that a child is about a hundred times more likely to be molested by the heterosexual partner of a close relative than by a homosexual. Other research finds that many of the men who molest children not only are not gay, they despise gays. In failing to make note of such research in articles where they represent men like Thomas Hamilton as gay pedophiles, journalists do more than misguide those who read or watch their reports; they feed right-

wing groups with material that is then used in interviews with the press and in membership solicitations as evidence that gays “seduce our children,” as Lou Sheldon put it in a solicitation mailing for his Traditional Values Coalition.<sup>46</sup>

## Stealth Weapons

One media commentator did provide an astute assessment of Thomas Hamilton and the search for deeper meaning that his butchery provoked. “We seem to think a monstrous effect must arise from a monstrous cause. But not much evidence turned up to make the eruption possible,” suggested Lance Morrow in an essay in *Time* magazine. To depict Hamilton’s abominable act as a “pedophiliac-itch-gone-violent” was, Morrow wrote, “inadequate, trivializing ... almost sacrilegious in its asymmetry.” In point of fact no one knows why Thomas Hamilton snapped. The headmaster at the school where the shooting occurred got it right when he said, shortly after the slaughter, “We don’t understand it and I don’t think we ever will.”<sup>47</sup>

Which is not to say that these deaths are inexplicable. Actually, four causes of the bloodbath in Dunblane can readily be identified. That the American news media barely managed to mention them is shameful. They were at once the most proximate and the most verifiable factors in the children's death.

I refer to the two revolvers and two semiautomatic pistols Hamilton used to carry out the carnage. Without his guns Hamilton never would have been able to slay so many people. More rigorous enforcement of Britain's gun licensing laws unquestionably had been warranted in Hamilton's case. At the local gun clubs Hamilton had a reputation for being unstable, and he was refused membership by one of the clubs five weeks before the killings. And several years before the bloodbath at the school, when a mother accused him of molesting some boys, Hamilton reportedly threatened her with a gun.<sup>48</sup>

Yet many American reporters brushed all this aside. "There were demands for even tougher gun laws in a country where gun homicides are about as common as water buffalo," *Newsweek* brusquely remarked. "In the days after the bloodletting, there were the predictable calls to toughen the country's gun control laws even further," said *People*.<sup>49</sup>

Some of the European press, however, got the point. An editorial in the British newspaper the *Daily Mail* asked the question that by rights should have been at the heart of all of the news media's coverage of the Dunblane massacre:

"Why should any private individual be legally allowed to own hand guns that can cause such carnage?" Their answer: "Whatever gun club apologists and sporting enthusiasts may say, there was nothing sporting about the caliber of the weapons which Hamilton was licensed to hoard in his own home. These were not small bore pistols for target practice. They were not suitable for shooting game birds. They are the macho tools of the killer's trade."<sup>50</sup>

Some American reporters and editors have swallowed so much baloney fed to them by the gun lobby they cough up explanations for gun deaths that credit everything *except* guns. They even blame their own industry. A columnist in *Newsweek* wrote of the Dunblane massacre, "Onanistic solitude, lived out in a fantasy world ruled by terror and thrilled by incessant gunfire, poses a lethal combination. Media moguls, enriched by promoting these fantasies, deny any blame for society's degradation. They are only giving society what it demands, they say."<sup>51</sup>

# Blame It on the Tube

In other words, it is the guns on TV that cause people to die in real life. Numerous American journalists, including some of the most intelligent among them, have actively endorsed the dizzy proposition that television creates “a reality of its own that may crowd out our real reality,” as Daniel Schorr, a network news correspondent for twenty-nine years before he moved to National Public Radio, put it. In an essay in the *Christian Science Monitor* Schorr gave as a case example John Hinckley, who “spent many hours alone in a room with a TV set, retreating into a world of fantasy violence” before his attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan. Interviewed by the Secret Service after the shooting, his first question was, “Is it on TV?” Schorr also rehearsed familiar statistics about the average eighteen-year-old having witnessed 200,000 acts of violence, including 40,000 murders, on the tube. At these levels of exposure, Schorr contended, young people “no longer know the difference between the bang-bang they grow up with on the television screen and the bang-bang that snuffs out real lives.”<sup>52</sup>

He may be right, but some of the historical antecedents of this line of reasoning are worth noting. During the golden age of radio scholars produced studies showing that listening impaired young people’s capacity to distinguish reality

from fantasy. And centuries earlier Plato cautioned against those who would tell stories to youngsters. “Children cannot distinguish between what is allegory and what isn’t,” says Socrates in Plato’s *Republic*, “and opinions formed at that age are difficult to change.”<sup>53</sup>

That society survived both the radio and the scroll should be of some reassurance. So should a recent study from UCLA’s Center for Communication Policy, which carefully analyzed 3,000 hours of TV programming on the major networks in the mid-1990s. The study found that a large proportion of the most sinister and decontextualized acts of violence on TV appear in cartoon shows such as “Batman and Robin” and on goofy prime-time programs such as “America’s Funniest Home Videos,” neither of which is likely to be confused with real life. By contrast, some of the most homicidal shows, such as “NYPD Blue” and “Homicide,” portrayed violence as horribly painful and destructive and not to be treated lightly.<sup>54</sup>

In a discerning op-ed piece in the *New York Times* author Patrick Cooke made a parallel observation: If young Americans have seen tens of thousands of murders on TV, surely, he commented, they have seen even more acts of kindness. On sitcoms, romantic comedies, movies of the week, soaps, medical dramas, and even on police shows, people are constantly falling in love and helping each other out. The characters on most prime-time shows “share so much

peace, tolerance and understanding that you might even call it gratuitous harmony,” Cooke observes. Why not conclude, he asks, that TV encourages niceness at least as much as it encourages violence?<sup>55</sup>

Yet social scientists who study relationships between TV violence and real-world violence, and whose research journalists, politicians, and activists cite in fear mongering about crime on TV, do not make niceness one of their outcome measures. They also neglect to pursue some important cross-cultural comparisons.

Some of the most seemingly persuasive studies relate what people watched as children to how aggressive or violent they are as adults. A heavy diet of TV brutality early in life correlates with violent behavior later on, the researchers demonstrate. Whether these correlations truly prove that TV violence provokes actual violence has been questioned, however, by social scientists who propose as a counterhypothesis that people already predisposed to violence are particularly attracted to violent TV programs. Equally important, when researchers outside the United States try to replicate these studies they come up empty-handed. Researchers in several countries find no relationship between adults’ levels of violence and the amount of TV violence they watched as kids.<sup>56</sup>

One widely quoted researcher who has made cross-national comparisons is Brandon Centerwall, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Washington, who has estimated that there would be 10,000 fewer murders each year in

the United States and 700,000 fewer assaults had TV never been invented. Centerwall based these numbers on an analysis of crime rates before and after the introduction of television in particular towns in Canada and South Africa. But what about present-time comparisons? David Horowitz, head of the Center for the Study of Popular Culture, a conservative advocacy organization, correctly points out that viewers in Detroit, Michigan, see the same TV shows as viewers in Windsor, Ontario, just across the river. Yet the murder rate in Detroit has been thirty times that in Windsor.<sup>57</sup>

TV shows do not kill or maim people. Guns do. It is the unregulated possession of guns, more than any other factor, that accounts for the disparity in fatality rates from violent crime in the United States compared to most of the world. The inadequate control of guns often accounts for the loss of life in dramatic crime incidents outside the United States as well—the massacre in Dunblane, Scotland, being a case in point. A difference between there and here, however, is that they accept the point and act on it. After the Dunblane tragedy the House of Commons strengthened Britain’s already ardent gun laws by outlawing all handguns larger than .22 caliber.<sup>58</sup>

# True Causation

This is not to say that there isn't too much violence on the box—both on entertainment programs and on newscasts that precede and follow them, which, as Steven Bochco, creator of “Hill Street Blues,” “NYPD Blue,” and other police shows has noted, contain more gore than anything the networks air during prime time. A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1997 found that even advertisements feature violence—and not only on programs whose content is violent. A child who watched a game of the World Series in 1996 was almost certain to see commercials that included shootings, stabbings, or other violence, the study documented.<sup>59</sup>

Nor do I imagine that televised violence has no negative impact. I doubt, however, that incitement to commit real-world violence is either the most common or the most significant effect. George Gerbner, Dean-emeritus of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, is closer to the mark with what he calls “the mean-world syndrome.” Watch enough brutality on TV and you come to believe you are living in a cruel and gloomy world in which you feel vulnerable and insecure. In his research over three decades Gerbner found that people who watch a lot of TV are more likely than others to believe their neighborhoods are unsafe, to assume that crime rates are

rising, and to overestimate their own odds of becoming a victim. They also buy more locks, alarms, and—you guessed it—guns, in hopes of protecting themselves. “They may accept and even welcome,” Gerbner reports, “repressive measures such as more jails, capital punishment, harsher sentences—measures that have never reduced crime but never fail to get votes—if that promises to relieve their anxieties. That is the deeper dilemma of violence-laden television.”<sup>60</sup>

Questions might be raised about whether Gerbner got the causal order right. (Does watching TV cause fear and conservatism, or is it that people prone to fear and conservatism watch more TV?) Yet it is striking how much resistance Gerbner encountered when he tried to report his research findings to the public. Frequently invited to speak on news programs and at governmental hearings where violence in the media is the topic, he finds himself ignored when he raises broader concerns. Appearing on ABC's “Viewpoint” back in 1983, Gerbner was asked by the host, Ted Koppel, “Is there a direct causal relationship to violence in our society?” A few minutes later, in the course of interviewing another panelist on the program, Koppel summarized Gerbner's response to that question as affirmative, there is a straightforward causal relationship between TV violence and real-life violence. Yet Gerbner's actual response had asserted that the true causal relationship is “between exposure to violence and one's feeling of where one belongs in the power structure—one's feeling of vulnerability, one's feeling of insecurity, one's demand for protection.”<sup>61</sup>

Ample real-world evidence in support of Gerbner's proposition can be found among the nation's elderly, many of whom are so upset by all the murder and mayhem they see on their television screens that they are terrified to leave their homes. Some become so isolated, studies found, that they do not get enough exercise and their physical and mental health deteriorates. In the worst cases they actually suffer malnutrition as a consequence of media-induced fear of crime. Afraid to go out and buy groceries, they literally waste away in their homes. The pattern becomes self-perpetuating; the more time elderly people spend at home, the more TV they tend to watch, and the more fearful they grow.<sup>62</sup>

All of which is regrettable because in actuality people over sixty-five are less likely than any other age group to become victims of violent crime—about sixteen times less likely than people under twenty-five, according to statistics from the Justice Department. The news media report these statistics on occasion, but more commonly they depict the elderly in the manner a *Boston Globe* article did, as “walking time bombs for crime, easy prey.” They speciously tell their older readers, as did the *Los Angeles Times*, “that a violent encounter—one that a younger person could easily survive—may end lethally for them: A purse-snatching becomes a homicide when an old woman falls to the pavement and dies in the hospital; an old man is brutalized and dies when he loses his will to live; an elderly couple are unable to flee their home during an arson fire, dying in the flames.”<sup>63</sup>

Journalists further drive home this mistaken message through their coverage of crimes committed against famous older people. After Rosa Parks, the civil rights heroine, was beaten and robbed in her Detroit home in 1994 at the age of eighty-one, the *Washington Post* talked of “weak and elderly citizens living at the mercy of street thugs.” Although violent crime against senior citizens had dropped by 60 percent in the previous twenty years, the *Post* went on to declare in an editorial, “What happened to Rosa Parks in Detroit is a common, modern-day outrage that quietly takes place across our land.”<sup>64</sup>

Immediately following the attack on Parks her neighbors had expressed concern that media hype would further stigmatize their neighborhood and city, and Parks herself urged reporters not to read too much into the event. Ignoring Parks's own view that she had been assaulted by “a sick-minded person,” reporters painted her assailant as “a self-involved brute” who “probably thought that as nice as all that civil rights stuff was, he was kicking the butt of just another now-useless old lady who was holding \$50,” as another *Washington Post* writer remarked.<sup>65</sup>

To hear the news media tell it, America's youth make a sport of victimizing old folks. *USA Today*, in a roundup article on crime against the elderly, told of Nathaniel Hurt, sixty-one, of Baltimore, who shot and killed a thirteen-year-old boy who had vandalized his property. Hurt said he had had enough of neighborhood teens taunting him. In their article *USA Today* neither depicted Hurt's actions as vigilantism nor provided information about the boy Hurt

murdered. Instead, the moral of the story came from Hurt's lawyer: "Police don't want to admit that elderly people in Baltimore can't go out their door without fear."<sup>66</sup>

## Crimes Nouveaux: Granny Dumping

The elderly can trust no one, politicians and reporters suggest. Everyone, including those entrusted to care for them, and even their own flesh and blood, may be potential victimizers.

"The American College of Emergency Physicians estimates that 70,000 elderly Americans were abandoned last year by family members unable or unwilling to care for them or pay for their care," the *New York Times* reported in an editorial that followed a front-page story heralding a major new trend. "Granny dumping," as it was called, attracted media attention after an incident in Idaho in 1992. John Kingery, a wheelchair-bound eighty-two-year-old Alzheimer's

patient who suffered from incontinence, was abandoned at a dog-racing track by his middle-aged daughter. "John Kingery is no isolated case," said the *Times* editorial, which, along with other accounts in the media, attributed granny dumping to the strains adult children endure in trying to care for their ailing parents.<sup>67</sup>

In point of fact, however, John Kingery was a relatively isolated case. When Leslie Bennetts, a freelance writer and former *New York Times* reporter, looked more closely at the Kingery story several weeks later she discovered that Kingery's daughter had not been caring for her father in the first place; moreover, she had been stealing his pension and Social Security money. Bennetts also looked into how the *Times* had arrived at the alarming 70,000 figure and discovered it had not come from the American College of Emergency Physicians but rather from dubious extrapolations made by a *Times* reporter based on a casual, nonscientific survey that ACEP had conducted. Out of 900 emergency room doctors who had been sent a questionnaire only 169 responded, and they reported seeing an average of 8 abandoned elders per week. The *Times* reporter multiplied 8 by 52 weeks and then by 169 to produce the 70,000 statistic.

Even were this a reasonable way to come up with an incidence rate (which it is not), few actual incidents remotely resemble what happened to John Kingery. In the ACEP survey the definition of granny dumping was very broad: a woman who lived by herself and checked into an emergency room for help qualified. "Moreover," writes Bennetts in a

debunking piece in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, “even a cursory check of emergency physicians reveals that the most common ‘parent-dumping’ problem is quite temporary, not the kind of permanent abandonment implied by the *Times*.” A typical dumping incident consists of caretakers who put an old person in the hospital over a weekend so they can rest up for a couple of days.<sup>68</sup>

Like Halloween sadism, workplace violence, gay-pedophile mass murder, and so many other *crimes nouveaux*, granny dumping was considerably less common, sensational, or pressing than the media made out. Like other scares about maltreatment of the elderly, the granny dumping scare played off the younger generations’ guilt while letting the individual reader or viewer off the hook by focusing on particularly evil people.

Even in coverage of the sorry state of many of the nation’s nursing homes the root problems of lack of funding and inadequate oversight disappear amid overdrawn images of evil caretakers. “We found them coast to coast in the best of places. Thugs, rapists, suspected thieves,” blares the announcer at the beginning of an edition of ABC’s “20/20”. “We caught them red-handed rifling through drawers in nursing homes, pocketing valuables and, worst of all, abusing your elderly loved ones.” The story, which takes up most of the broadcast, relays incident upon incident of nursing home aides with lengthy criminal records who allegedly robbed and mistreated residents. “Most nursing home owners are not

a bit careful about who they hire,” someone identified as a former nursing home inspector says, and ABC correspondent Catherine Crier tells of patients being raped and beaten.<sup>69</sup>

Only in passing does Crier note that the pay nursing home aides receive “is notoriously low” for a job that is “difficult and often unpleasant.” Nor does the report deal with problems that, unlike rape and other forms of assault, occur on a regular basis in American nursing homes. (According to some reports, 40 percent of nursing home residents suffer from malnutrition, to take one urgent example.)<sup>70</sup>

No, as Crier herself says at the very beginning of her report, “This is not a story about bad conditions in nursing homes, it’s about bad people who end up working there.” It is, in other words, another in the endless cache of stories about villains and victims, stories in which real people in their real complexity and the real dangers they and the larger society face can be glimpsed only in the shadows.