

# **Expose Politicians' Exploitation of Fear and Anger. Fear and Anger Often Disempower People. Let's Strategize to Expose and Dismiss Fear, So We Can Make Progress.**

by Glen Anderson

## **Expose Politicians' Exploitation of Fear**

All throughout the 2016 election campaign season and after his inauguration, Trump was provoking fear and anger against various targets. He provoked fear of various kinds of vulnerable people and urged people to retaliate against them in various ways. He exploited people's fear of economic and social insecurity but directed people's antagonism at the wrong targets. **After making people afraid and angry, the remedy he proposed was to elect him – the big, strong man – to protect us from Mexicans, Muslims, uppity blacks, feminists, gays, Iran, and so forth.**

Trump's provocation and exploitation of fear is exactly what dictators do. Make people afraid of "the other" and assert that only he – the dictator – is strong enough to protect people from those dangers. Trump created and promoted his public image as a strong business leader, a tough negotiator, the strong man who will protect us from whatever frightens us. Other dictators have used this same approach to target Jews or Communists, and now Trump has used it against the targets that he chose. The dynamics are the same.

**Notice that nothing that Trump has said or done would actually solve problems. It's all about provoking fear, anger and blame targeted at vulnerable people. It's all negative. The few remedies he has proposed are all baloney.**

EXAMPLE #1: The Trumpcare/Ryancare alternative to Obama's ACA was incredibly cruel to people and was actually a scam offering massive tax breaks for the richest Americans.

EXAMPLE #2: Trump's proposed wall along our Mexican border is a phony remedy that was only intended to hype fear and anger toward Mexicans – and to distract white Americans from reality. Actually, most of the people who are in the U.S. without documentation had arrived here legally and simply overstayed their tourist visas, student visas or work visas. They came from many different countries. Immigration from Mexico has declined sharply in recent years. So Trump's wall would not solve any real problems, but it served him as a political gimmick for inciting fear and anger. Of course, such a big project would need to be built by big businesses, so that would enrich his cronies.

EXAMPLE #3: His radical trashing of governmental "regulations" actually is a radical elimination of

protections for people and the environment. Big business has been polluting our environment, so government has passed laws and regulations to protect the environment and public health. Big banks and credit cards have been ripping off consumers, so government has passed laws and regulations to protect ordinary people from financial and legal abuse. I remember the 1950s and 1960s when very serious coal mining accidents occurred very often and killed many people, and we used to have more passenger airplane crashes and automobile accident deaths, so the government passed laws and regulations to improve safety in various ways. When right-wing politicians denounce "regulations," they are denouncing protections for people and our environment.

Throughout history other politicians of both parties have cynically provoked fears too. In 1960 Democrat John F. Kennedy – running against Republican Richard Nixon, who was finishing his second term as President Eisenhower's Vice President – claimed (contrary to the truth) that there was a "missile gap" in which the U.S. was lagging behind the Soviet Union, and Nixon should be blamed. In 1968 George Wallace and Richard Nixon ran presidential campaigns that exploited white fears of African Americans and older people's fears of young people who opposed war and social injustices.

Wisely, Franklin D. Roosevelt said in 1933 – immediately after becoming President during the Great Depression – "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." He took many very bold actions to activate the federal government in solving various aspects of our nation's most serious economic crisis. His positive actions and his repeated statements against fear gave the nation confidence that we could indeed solve problems.

Trump and the right-wing Congress are doing the opposite. They utterly refuse to solve problems. They are disempowering federal agencies in order to prevent the government from solving problems. They threaten state and local governments that do want to solve problems (*e.g.*, related to the environment, immigrant rights, women's health, economic justice, reducing harm from drug use).

**Our organizing efforts should explicitly expose how Trump and Congress are promoting fear, trying to disempower people, and cynically refusing to solve problems.**

## Fear Tends to Disempower People

This article's first two paragraphs point out that politicians promote fear for two reasons: (1) they focus people's negative emotions against a vulnerable target population; and (2) they position themselves as the strong man who is the only person who can save the public from the dangers posed by "the other." Indeed, during the campaign Trump kept saying that only he could save us from the dangers he was exploiting.

Decades ago Abraham Maslow devised a model that identified people's Hierarchy of Needs." Self-actualization and esteem were near the top, but people could pay attention to meeting those needs only after they had met their basic survival needs (food, housing, security, safety, etc.).

A civilized nation recognizes these basic survival needs as inherent human rights, so a civilized nation works to meet these needs for every person. Having achieved that, a civilized nation helps people meet the higher needs in various ways. Tyrants and abusive economic systems push people downward on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Tyrants disempower and oppress people by – among other methods – threatening people's basic survival needs in order to extract labor from them under unjust conditions.

### Let's Strategize to Expose and Dismiss Fear, So We Can Make Progress

Many of the issues that politically progressive people work on – climate, racism, nuclear weapons, death penalty, etc. – have emotional complexities that we must address, in addition to educating the public about the facts.

For example, if somebody is so deeply afraid of crime that they demand knee-jerk "tough-on-crime" laws, they will not be psychologically open to learning about how horribly unjust the death penalty is. Their fear is a psychological barrier to solving the problem and abolishing the death penalty. So besides presenting the facts, we must simultaneously devise strategies to reduce the fear and other psychological barriers that prevent people from learning about the death penalty and pushing to abolish it. In fact, even the very topics of murder and death are unpleasant for most people to deal with, so we must figure out how to reduce those barriers too.

Likewise, we need to recognize the fears and other psychological barriers that make people avoid acknowledging problems of racism, nuclear weapons, the climate crisis, etc. We can make progress on these issues only if we devise smart strategies to deal with fears and other psychological barriers, in addition to devising ways to educate the public and politicians about the facts. But no amount of facts will penetrate a person's psychological defenses, so we must strategize how to deal with

Tyrants threaten those basic survival needs in order to unjustly force people to become loyal to the oppressive regime in order to seek basic survival and safety.

We see this happening now with the right wing slashing services for poor people, reducing workers' rights, concentrating economic power in big business's hands, "de-regulating" and stripping away the government's protections of people and our environment, etc.

All of these put ordinary people at serious risk of basic survival. Insights from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs suggest that these right-wing threats to people's survival push people downward on the hierarchy so people will have less self-esteem and be less able to "self-actualize," and people will have to scramble harder for mere survival, and this would sap their energy and self-respect so they will be less able to organize to protect their rights. This in turn would make people even more dependent on the right-wing oppressors.

When people are trampled upon in these ways, they can feel disempowered. See the section below for strategically savvy remedies.

psychological factors before people will be able to hear and absorb our facts.

This psychological factor is a crucial "missing link" in progressive movements' organizing. This also leads us to have compassion for people who are stuck in their psychological defenses and their lack of factual knowledge. In order to move the grassroots toward organizing remedies for solving problems, we must start where people are now, understand the psychological factors that have trapped some people, and compassionately help them get unstuck and move ahead.

Most organizing neglects this crucial first step.

Profound nonviolence and compassion are absolutely vital parts of strategies for helping our nation recognize the cruelty and oppression of Trumpism and right-wing politics. If we are strategically savvy we can turn things around!

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