

October 7, 2002

Dear Friends,

A word that seems to crop up repeatedly in almost every conversation I have with fellow Americans these days is fear. At first, I paid no attention but then it struck me at how rarely one hears the word or its equivalent in talks with non-Americans. So I have been musing on whether we always were a “fear society,” why so many people seem fearful, whether “fear” is general or specific and whether it is justified or paranoid. Finally, I consider what is being done and what could be done to alleviate our worries.

Students of the brain speculate on how and to what extent “deep memory” plays a part in our current thought. As a historian, I have been fascinated by their speculations and have concluded that, like a computer, our brains are “hard wired” to be receptive to certain but not other attitudes. It is evident, I think, that such connections would have been made over the several million years (each new discovery adds a hundred thousand or so years) of our evolution as a separate species. What has been discovered indicates that our remote ancestors were very small, nearly defenseless, slow runners and without significant tools or weapons. For them to have survived at all seems nearly a miracle. The best guesses as to how they did it all point toward cooperation. Living in small groups, probably numbering no more than 60 or so kinsmen and women with their children and grandchildren, members had to help one another, defend another another, share or starve, be killed or chased away. Similar groups are now rare but have become so only in the last few centuries. So for, say, 200,000 generations “we” lived one way; only in the last 10 or so generations have we begun to live in quite a different way. Gone are the networks of kindred that sustained us; we are now more or less alone. Competitiveness has replaced cooperation. That, I suspect, has increased our sense of insecurity.

Americans are conditioned by our history to be fearful. As my friend the architect Walter Gropius used to say, only half jokingly, about his first impressions of the way Americans treated our woods, “I could not understand why the first thing anyone did in building a house was to cut down the surrounding trees. In Europe we would build around them. Finally it dawned on me that Americans were always afraid Indians would be hiding behind them.”

A reading of American history shows that the joke had a hard edge. Because we were taking the land away from the Indians, they tried to defend it. They never really had a chance, of course, but in trying they terrified (and infuriated) the settlers on the frontier. From the earliest days of settlers along the Atlantic coast right through the “winning of the West,” fear of “the savages” permeated white society and took on the aspects of a medieval horror story of witches and goblins. Generations of Americans were reared on such stories and they were, of course, emphasized in the movies.

Our land was untamed. When I was a boy on the ranch in Texas, I always rode with a Winchester in my gun boot. The howl of a wolf still sends shivers up my neck although, rationally, I know that one searches in vain for an account of a wolf killing a human being. It may be that somewhere deep in our brains is a repository of memory of the long African nights when our remote ancestors really did have to fear wild beasts of the night. Our delight in being frightened by them (as we sit safely in front of television) suggests that the repository exists. And the movie studios know that frightening us is a sure way to make a lot of money.

Beyond this basic sense of fear, we are unquestionably a society in flux. We have long since given up the security of the small village and opted for the amorphousness of the suburb or the excitement of the city. Few of us live in what has always been the norm of human society, a group of kindred. We are constantly bumping into strangers on whom we have no call for loyalty or compassion. Our great American philosopher Mark Twain warned us that “when you see someone coming down the street toward you with his arms outstretched and a smile on his face, turn and run like hell.”

Black experience was, of course, different from white experience. Blacks lived on the margins of American society and rarely were secure. For them, the police, upon whom whites relied for the ultimate protection, were a source of danger and the courts, to which we are accustomed to turn for redress of grievance, a tool of repression. It is, I believe, a change in these circumstances that future historians will laud as our great reform of the Twentieth century. But, still among blacks, fear of whites, their institutions and of course of one another in conditions of insecurity, is a real and proximate condition of daily life.

These are general considerations. What marks Americans off from others, I suggest, is ironically, the opposite of much of the above: we have, at least in the last century and a half, lived in a protected suburb of the world. The last serious foreign invasion of America was in the War of 1812 when the British burned Washington, controlled the outlet of the Mississippi and had garrisons along our Canadian frontier. Of course, we managed to do great damage to ourselves in the Civil War. But thereafter it was what we did to others rather than what they did to us that was noteworthy.

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