The discussion that we started in our newsletter 'Standpoint of the Week' *about the fears of the new decade continues on. Following are the opinions of* **Dan Gardner***, Canadian writer and futurologist, whose books include 'Risk: The Science and Politics of Fear' (2008), and 'Future Babble' (2010). He thinks that fears are irrational and thus unavoidable.*

FEAR IS THE BEST TOOL

Dan Gardner

Fear is enormously important in a democratic society. **When you have a large portion of the population that is afraid of something, democracy is responsive, and political leaders give them what they want**, even when it doesn't make any sense whatsoever.

I'm sure you remember the Columbine School massacre in the US ten years ago, which was a terrible, terrible event, causing a huge shock and a huge amount of concern and alarm. All the polls showed that the majority of Americans were very very afraid that this would happen to their children and they demanded better security for their children. Of course, authorities responded with a whole series of laws and measures and policies, they spent a huge amount of money on school security, on school guards, and on school metal detectors. There were schools that couldn't even afford school textbooks or teacher salaries, but they were putting what little money they had into security. Well, did that response make sense? No, it didn't, because we know categorically from proper research that in all the years leading up to the Columbine massacre school violence was far from getting worse, it was actually getting much, much better. We also know that, in fact, the threat at any one school, for any one child, of a similar event happening was essentially zero. It's incredibly unlikely — a child has a better chance of being struck by lightning. And so, basically, you had a huge amount of resources squandered because of irrational fears.

A more dramatic example, and one we're still playing at today, is terrorism. In fact, I was just looking at the figures recently. After the September 11th 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, a substantial majority of Americans feared that they or their loved ones would be victims of terrorism. Well, that was crazy. It was completely out of proportion with reality. Even if there had been a wave of fatal terrorist attacks in the United States, the chances of any one person being killed by a terrorist would be microscopic. But because that fear was so huge, and so visceral, and so real, the American government of course responded, and it responded by pouring vast amounts of money into security and has since spent immense amounts of money, which, frankly, it can't afford. The government has clamped down on and violated civil liberties, and it used the fear of terrorism as one of its pretexts for the invasion of Iraq, which, and we all know how well that went. So, here again a grossly inflated fear has produced disastrous results.

It would be nice if you could remove irrational fear from public dialogue, but it won't happen for the very simple reason that, again, to go back to evolution, we are evolutionarily wired to give priority to threat. There's very clear research to show that, basically, **if you have information competing for your attention, that information which says 'You're in danger' will get your top priority and the other information will be ignored.** What that means is if you're a politician, and you want to get people's attention, and you want to motivate people and to get them to act in a certain way, fear is always the best tool. And, of course, this is not necessarily a modern thing, it's something that can be seen in all political systems at all times. What's different now perhaps is the speed with which such fear can be proliferated through modern information technology. ∎

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