

## A coalition of fear

Al Gore: "In many ways, George W. Bush reminds me more of Nixon than any other previous president."

Editor's note: Following is the full text of Al Gore's keynote address at the New School University's conference on "Fear: Its Political Uses and Abuses," delivered Feb. 5 in New York.

**T**hank you for inviting me to speak at this timely conference on the Uses and Misuses of Fear in our political system in America.

It is an honor to be part of a program that includes so many distinguished scholars who, unlike me, have genuine expertise in these matters.

And I want to acknowledge that I have already learned a lot from them by reading some of what they have written and by calling some of them on the telephone before trying to organize my own thoughts on this topic.

It's also a personal pleasure to share a dais with my friend and former Senate colleague Bob Kerrey, who brings to this discussion not only his experience in political and academic leadership but also—it bears noting because of the subject of our discussions here—his extraordinary personal example of how to stare down the fear of death and lead with raw courage in circumstances that are hard for the rest of us to imagine.

We are meeting, moreover, in a city that has itself been forced to learn how to conquer terror. And because we are gathered very close to ground zero, we should of course begin our deliberations with a moment of respect and remembrance for those who died on 9/11 and for those who have been bereaved.

Terrorism, after all, is the ultimate misuse of fear for political ends.

Indeed, its specific goal is to distort the political reality of a nation by creating fear in the general population that is hugely disproportionate to the actual danger the terrorists are capable of posing.

That is one of the reasons it was so troubling last week when the widely respected arms expert David Kay concluded a lengthy and extensive investigation in Iraq for the Bush administration with these words:

"We were all wrong."

The real meaning of Kay's devastating verdict is that for more than two years, President Bush and his administration have been distorting America's political reality by force-feeding the American people a grossly exaggerated fear of Iraq that was hugely disproportionate to the actual danger posed by Iraq.

How could that happen?

Could it possibly have been intentional?

Well, there are some clues . . . the fear campaign aimed at Iraq was timed for the kickoff of the midterm election campaign of 2002—you know, the one where Max Cleland, who lost three limbs fighting for America in Vietnam, was accused of being unpatriotic.

The curious timing was explained by the president's chief of staff as a marketing decision—timed for the post-Labor Day advertising period.

For everything there is a season—particularly the politics of fear.

And it did serve to distract attention from pesky domestic issues like the economy, which were, after all, beginning to worry the White House in the summer of 2002.

And of course there is now voluminous evidence that the powerful clique inside the administration that had been agitating for war against Iraq since before the inauguration immediately seized upon the tragedy of 9/11 as a terrific opportunity to accomplish what they had not been able to do beforehand: invade a country that had not attacked us and didn't threaten us.

They were clever and they managed to get the job done.

But some deceitfulness took place somehow.

The so-called intelligence was stretched beyond recognition, distorted and misrepresented.

Some of it that the president personally presented to the American people on national television in his State of the Union address turned out to have been actually forged by someone—though we still don't know who (and, amazingly enough, the White House still doesn't seem to really care who forged the document).

The CIA had warned his staff not to let him use that particular document, but there was some kind of regrettable communications foul-up inside the National Security Council.

But now the president has expressed his determination to find out who is actually responsible for the intelligence being “all wrong.”

Over the past 18 months, I have delivered a series of speeches addressing different aspects of President Bush's agenda, including his decision to go to war in Iraq under patently false pretenses, his dangerous assault on civil liberties here at home, his outrageously fraudulent economic policy, and his complete failure to protect the global environment.

Initially, my purposes were limited in each case to the subject matter of the speech.

However, as I tried to interpret what was driving these various policies, certain common features became obvious and a clear pattern emerged: In every case there was a determined disinterest in the facts; an inflexible insistence on carrying out preconceived policies regardless of the evidence concerning what might work and what clearly would not; a consistent bias favoring the wealthy and powerful at the expense of the broader public interest; and a marked tendency to develop policies in secret, avoid accountability to the public, the Congress or the press; and a disturbing willingness to misrepresent the true nature of the policy involved.

And no matter what the issue, it is now clear that in every instance they have resorted to the language and politics of fear in order to short-circuit debate and drive the public agenda.

The administration did not hesitate to heighten and distort public fear of terrorism after 9/11, to create a political case for attacking Iraq.

Iraq was said to be working hand in hand with al-Qaida.

Iraq was said to be on the verge of a nuclear weapons capability.

Defeating Saddam Hussein was conflated into bringing war to the terrorists, even though what it really meant was diverting resources away from the pursuit of the people who attacked us and causing us to lose focus on that task.

The administration also did not hesitate to use fear of terrorism to launch a broadside attack on measures that have been in place for a generation to prevent a repetition of gross abuses of authority by the FBI and by the intelligence community at the height of the Cold War.

I served on the House Select Committee on Intelligence immediately after the period when the revelations of these abuses led to major reforms.

Conservatives on that panel resisted those changes tooth and nail.

They have long memories, and now these same constraints have been targeted in the PATRIOT Act and have been sharply diminished or removed.

And the president wants the PATRIOT Act extended and made permanent.

Neither did the administration have any scruples about using fear of terrorists as a means to punch holes in the basic protections of the Constitution: to create a class of permanent prisoners; to make it possible to imprison Americans without due process; to totally sequester information not just from the people, but from the Congress and the courts—all justified by recourse to fear.

Our nation has gone through other periods in our history when the misuse of fear resulted in abuses of civil liberties:

The Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, the Palmer Raids and the Red Scare after World War I, the internment of Japanese-Americans in World War II, and the McCarthy abuses of the Cold War.

After each of these periods of excess we have felt ashamed and have tried to make up for the abuses.

And although we have not yet entered the period of regret and atonement this time around, it is already obvious that we are now in a period of regrettable excess.

The administration did not hesitate to use economic fear of recession as a means to put in place its tax cuts, massively benefiting the wealthiest while loading debt on the rest of the country for generations to come.

It used fear of energy shortage to build an energy policy made to order for the oil industry at the expense of the rest of us.

It used the fear that we would lose competitiveness to block responsible action to deal with global warming, and has by that action mortgaged not only us but our children and their children to consequences unmitigated by any acts of foresight in this generation.

Meanwhile, even the Chinese have passed us in fuel-economy standards for new automobiles.

It uses fear of the problems of old age to contrive an illusory drug bill that essentially transfers billions from the people to the pockets of vast pharmaceutical interests.

It does not hesitate to use fear even of God not only to pronounce its views on marriage but to impose them on the nation as a constitutional amendment.

At the level of our relations with the rest of the world, the administration has willingly traded in respect for the United States in favor of fear: that is the real meaning of “shock and awe.”

It is this administration’s theory that American “dominance”—coupled with a doctrine of preemptive strikes (regardless of whether the threat is imminent or not; today George Tenet made it clear that the CIA never said Iraq was an imminent threat) will be sufficient to persuade our rivals and enemies to leave the field.

But there is another question that I believe urgently needs attention: how could our nation have become so vulnerable to such an effective use of fear to manipulate our politics?

After all, it is a serious indictment of our political discourse that almost three-quarters of all Americans were so easily led to believe that Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the attacks of 9/11—that nearly half of all Americans still believe that most of the hijackers were Iraqis—and that more than 40 percent were so easily convinced that Iraq did in fact have nuclear weapons.

A free press is supposed to function as our democracy’s immune system against such gross errors of fact and understanding.

What happened?

Well, for one thing, there has been a dramatic change in what the philosopher Jürgen Habermas describes as the structure of the public forum.

It is simply no longer as accessible to the free exchange of ideas, which flowed during the Enlightenment.

The age of print effectively ended in the 1960s when television overtook newspapers—and the gap has grown dramatically since then.

The ownership of the media companies has also changed.

The leadership of the Republican Party is augmented by its links to the corporate ownership of the conglomerates that control most of our media: a process already so far advanced that it alarmed even conservative members of Congress and caused them to join to oppose the FCC’s efforts to make the world of information safe for monopoly.

Though the president is still outmaneuvering them.

And this after all, includes a growing part of the media characterized by paranoia presented as entertainment—the part that allows drug-addled hypocrites, compulsive gamblers, and assorted religious bigots to masquerade as moral guides for the nation.

What are the consequences?

Fear drives out reason.

It suppresses the politics of discourse and opens the door to the politics of destruction.

It also requires us to pay more attention to the new discoveries about the way fear affects our brains . . .

The root word for democracy—“demos”—meant the masses of common people, who were an object of fear in the minds of many of our country’s founders.

What they wanted was an orderly society in which property would be safe from arbitrary confiscation (remember the Revolutionary War was in significant measure about taxation).

What they believed was that a too pure democracy would expose that society to the ungoverned passions of what today we call “the street”: of people with little to lose, whose angers could be all too easily aroused by demagogues (note the root, again) and turned against those with wealth.

So the Constitution of which we are so proud is really an effort—based at least as much on fear as on hope—to compromise and balance out the conflicting agendas of two kinds of Americans: those who already have achieved material success, and those who aspire to it; those who are happy with the status quo, and those who can only accept the status quo if it is the jumping-off place to something better for themselves.

That tension can never be fully resolved, and it is perfectly clear at the present moment in the profoundly differing agendas of our two major parties.

Neither has the fear that underlies these differences gone away, however well it may be camouflaged.

**S**omewhere along the line, the Republican Party became merely the nameplate for the radical right in this country.

The radical right is, in fact, a coalition of those who fear other Americans: as agents of treason, as agents of confiscatory government, as agents of immorality.

This fear gives the modern Republican Party its well-noted cohesiveness and its equally well-noted practice of jugular politics.

Even in power, the modern Republican Party feels itself to be surrounded by hostility: beginning with government itself, which they present as an enemy; extending to those in the opposition party; and ultimately, on to that portion of the country whose views and hopes are represented by it—that is to say, to virtually half the nation.

Under these circumstances, it is natural—perhaps tragic in the classical sense—but nonetheless natural—for the modern Republican Party to be especially proficient in the use of fear as a technique for obtaining and holding power.

This phenomenon was clear under both Presidents Reagan and Bush Sr., except softened to an extent by the personalities of both men.

Under our current President Bush, however, the machinery of fear is right out in the open, operating at full throttle.

Fear and anxiety have always been a part of life and always will be.

Fear is ubiquitous and universal, in every human society, a normal part of the human condition.

But we have always defined progress by our success in managing through our fears.

Christopher Columbus, Lewis and Clark, the Wright Brothers, and Neil Armstrong—all found success by challenging the unknown and overcoming fear with courage and a keen sense of proportion that helped them overcome real fears without being distracted by distorted and illusory fears.

As with individuals, nations succeed or fail—and define their essential character—by the way they challenge the unknown and cope with fear.

And much depends upon the quality of their leadership.

If their leaders exploit their fears and use them to herd people in directions they might not otherwise choose, then fear itself can quickly become a self-perpetuating and freewheeling force that drains national will and weakens national character, diverting attention from real threats deserving of healthy and appropriate concern, and sowing confusion about the essential choices that every nation must constantly make about its future.

Leadership means inspiring us to manage through our fears.

Demagoguery means exploiting our fears for political gain.

Fifty years ago, when the nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union was raising tensions in the world and McCarthyism was threatening freedom at home, President Eisenhower said, “Any who act as if freedom’s defenses are to be found in suppression and suspicion and fear confess a doctrine that is alien to America.”

But only 15 years later, when Ike’s v.p., Richard Nixon, finally became president, it marked the beginning of a big change in America’s politics.

Nixon embodied the spirit of “suppression and suspicion and fear” that Eisenhower denounced.

And it first became apparent in the despicable midterm election campaign of 1970 waged by Nixon and Vice President Agnew.

I saw that campaign firsthand: my father, the bravest politician I have ever known, was slandered as unpatriotic because he opposed the Vietnam War and accused of being an atheist because he opposed a Constitutional amendment to allow government-sponsored prayer in the public schools.

I was in the Army at the time—on my way to Vietnam.

I had a leave the week of the election.

“Law and order,” and court-ordered busing for racial integration of the schools, were the other big issues.

It was a sleazy campaign by Nixon—one that is now regarded as a watershed marking a sharp decline in the tone of our national discourse.

In many ways, George W. Bush reminds me more of Nixon than any other previous president.

Like Bush, Nixon subordinated virtually every principle to his hunger for reelection.

He instituted wage and price controls with as little regard for his “conservative” principles as Bush has shown in piling up trillions of dollars of debt.

After the oil embargo of 1973, Nixon threatened a military invasion of the oil fields of the Middle East. Now Bush has actually done it.

Both kept their true intentions secret.

Like Bush, Nixon understood the political uses and misuses of fear.

After he was driven from office in disgrace, one of Nixon’s confidants quoted Nixon as having told him this: “People react to fear, not love.

“They don’t teach that in Sunday school, but it’s true.”

The night before that election, 33 years and three months ago, Sen. Ed Muskie of Maine spoke on national television for the Democrats and said, “There are only two kinds of politics. They are not radical and reactionary, or conservative and liberal. Or even Democrat and Republican. There are only the politics of fear and the politics of trust.

“One says: You are encircled by monstrous dangers. Give us power over your freedom so we may protect you.

“The other says: The world is a baffling and hazardous place, but it can be shaped to the will of men . . . [C]ast your vote for trust . . . in the ancient traditions of this home for freedom.”

The next day my father was defeated. Defeated by the politics of fear.

But his courage in standing for principle made me so proud that I really felt he had won something more important than an election.

In his speech that night, he stood the old segregationist slogan on its head and defiantly promised: "The truth shall rise again!"

I wasn't the only person who heard that promise. Nor the only one for whom that hope still rings loud and true.

I hope and believe that this year the politics of fear will be defeated and the truth shall rise again.

Almost 3,000 years ago, Solomon warned that where there is no vision, the people perish.

But the converse is also surely true: Where there is leadership with vision and moral courage, the people will flourish and redeem Lincoln's prophesy at Gettysburg: that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.