

## The Fear Factor

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*(Editor's note: This paper by Robert J. Howell is the winner of the LCSR Program Director's Award for the best paper dealing with a social problem in the 2007 issue of the Agora.)*

What is the best way to unite and protect a diversified population? Throughout history, a number of methods designed to create a loyal and united population have either evolved or have been implemented by those in authority. Sadly, the most effective means of unification thus far has been the fear and hatred of a common enemy and the ensuing desire for security. For the United States, "the boogie man" seems to change with the times. We have been united in our hatred of Britain's monarchy, Russia's communism, and most recently Islam's radical fundamentalism. Unfortunately, our zeal to protect our country from outside threats has had a corrosive effect internally. Our society is so focused on fear that we have become susceptible to a gradual erosion of our freedoms.

Following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, this country has struggled to find a balance between the need for increased security and the preservation of the civil liberties that we have become accustomed to. In the days following the 9/11 attacks, with the image of a proud American landmark reduced to a smoldering ruin, the prevailing sentiment was one of "we will do what ever it takes to defeat the evil doers." Our country became united virtually overnight, and the prospect of giving up some of our freedoms in the name of safety and security seemed reasonable. Americans seemed willing to accept the inconvenience of increased security screening at airports, government buildings, and large public gatherings. Unfortunately, these minor inconveniences were just the tip of the iceberg; far more serious intrusions into the lives of American citizens have come to light recently.

The same administration that ran on a platform of less government involvement in the lives of its citizens has some explaining to do. The most controversial “security” initiative thus far is the Bush administration’s domestic spying program. In a *New York Times* article published in December, 2005, James Risen wrote “Months after the September 11 attacks, President Bush *secretly* authorized the National Security Agency to eavesdrop on Americans and others inside the United States to search for evidence of terrorist activity without the court-approved warrants ordinarily required for domestic eavesdropping” (Risen 1). This circumventing of our country’s system of checks and balances sets a very dangerous precedent. How long could it be before the government begins sifting through our private medical records and other sensitive documents looking for terrorists? Are these the actions of a free and open society?

We are under *Leviathan*’s microscope, and it is fear that keeps us there. In Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, he asserts that without a giant authority figure to keep the citizens in awe, civilization would break down and life would be “nasty, brutish and short” (Hobbes 64). It is this blindfold of fear that the Leviathan beast relies on. In exchange for security, either real or imagined, the American public has been called on to give up more information and civil liberties than ever before in our history. In doing so, we are feeding a beast that will never be satisfied.

Senior symposium speaker Brian Besanceney spoke calmly, with an ominous undertone, of how there would be “good and bad days ahead in the war on terror” and how the odds favor another terrorist attack. Besanceney also alluded to the increasing amounts of private information being sought by the federal government. In this speaker’s view, feeding the Leviathan beast the information it needs to fight terrorism is a minor and necessary

inconvenience. I disagree. Wiretapping, data mining, and other intrusions into the lives of average American citizens is a very slippery slope. The information now being collected in the name of combating terrorism could be used for more sinister purposes when the terror threat has subsided. Private information should remain private except in the most extreme cases.

Times such as these test our true commitment to democracy and the personal freedoms it promises. If we continue on our present course we will be destroying the very village we are trying to protect. I believe that we can protect the homeland without resorting to extreme and intrusive measures. Let's not fall victim to the paralyzing forces of fear. Fear is, after all, the most powerful weapon in the terrorist's arsenal. If the United States is truly to be the "land of the free," limits must be imposed on the government's access to personal and private information. America should be a beacon of hope, not a fortress of fear.

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