

# **America the Fearful**

**by James Carroll**

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THE MORE powerful the United States becomes, the more frightened we are. Why is that?

An undercurrent of hysteria has coursed through the talk out of Washington over the last week as, first, critics demanded to know whether government officials had ignored warnings of the terrorist attacks of last September and, second, the same government officials -- in response? -- issued a new warning of coming attacks that might be even worse.

The new warning is sharp enough to generate fear but too vague to enable any defensive preparation. In airports, citizens sheepishly submit to screening measures that are still administered with such incompetence that they can only enhance uneasiness -- prompting the question, Is that the point? Meanwhile, the FBI admits it has no clue about the anthrax attacks, American soldiers remain on the hunt in Afghanistan, Pentagon war planners are getting ready for Iraq, and even Cuba is said to be readying biological weapons.

The war on terrorism is not the only manifestation of heightened levels of our national fear. This week Presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin will sign an arms reduction treaty that includes a US-sponsored provision allowing for the indefinite mothballing of thousands of disarmed nuclear weapons. Notice this: The United States, breaking with the primordial assumption of nuclear arms control, is now saying that the overkill supply of warheads must be preserved against future threats -- as yet entirely unimagined. This marks the end of the hope, long shared by conservatives and liberals alike, that human beings might eventually wean themselves of these terrible weapons altogether.

In one stroke, Bush has taken us from "reduction" to "storage." He has reversed the most positive foreign policy track of our lifetimes, and he has done it out of fear.

Here is the irony: The surest way to make the world an even more dangerous place is to posit danger as the most important thing about it. This week's treaty is the clearest case in point. America's determination to preserve thousands of excess nuclear warheads means that now Russia, despite its firm preference for elimination, will certainly preserve them as well.

And what will happen over time to those warheads? When the urgency of keeping such material out of the hands of rogue elements is clear, the American move away from full elimination of nukes, especially in Russia, makes no sense. But that very irrationality is the revelation.

We are like a nation that has had a psychological break and is descending into rank paranoia. The destruction of the twin towers shows that there are things to be afraid of, but our government's mad responses are making us more vulnerable to such things, not less.

The "war on terrorism" has strengthened the hand of those who hate America. The US example of "overwhelming force" has pushed the Middle East into the abyss and has dragged India-Pakistan to its edge. The only real protections against cross-border terrorism are international structures of criminal justice like the recently established International Criminal Court, yet an "unsigned" United States slaps the court down with contempt.

Since September we have squandered our wealth and focus on a huge war while neglecting police work and intelligence at home and abroad. Hence the vagueness of the current warning. And how dare our government set off alarms about Cuba's putative bioterrorism project while it has done nothing to apprehend the anthrax killer? Oh, and -- forgive me, just asking -- where is Osama?

The Bush administration's warning about Castro's interest in bioterrorism could seem blatantly timed to deflect political pressures arising from Jimmy Carter's trip to Havana. Vice President Cheney's agitated Sunday alarm about imminent terrorist attacks could seem timed to defuse last week's long overdue political offensive by Democrats. The president's rejection, in principle, of arms "reduction" could seem to serve his larger political and economic purpose of restoring the American war industry to its place of preeminence. The president and his closest advisers, in other words, could be cynically exaggerating threats to our national security for their narrow purposes.

But it may be worse than that. The shape of their dread is useful to them in these ways, but, also, like the mentally disturbed, they seem convinced that any danger they imagine is real. Our nation is being led by men and women who are at the mercy of their fears. That they work hard to keep the American people afraid might seem to suggest that they want merely to deflect any second-guessing about the course they have set, but in fact our fear reinforces theirs.

Fear has become Washington's absolute and is shaping its every response to the future. America is being led by cowards.

James Carroll's column appears regularly in the *Globe*.

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