

Charge the Cockpit or Die: An Anatomy of Fear-Driven Political Rhetoric in  
American Conservatism

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**Abstract**

Subthreshold negative emotions have superseded conscious reason as the initial and strongest motivators of political behavior. Political neuroscience uses the concepts of negativity bias and terror management theory to explore why fear-driven rhetoric plays such an outsized role in determining human political actions. These mechanisms of human anthropology are explored by competing explanations from biblical and evolutionary scholars who attempt to understand their contribution to human vulnerabilities to fear. When these mechanisms are observed in fear-driven political rhetoric, three common characteristics emerge: exaggerated threat, tribal combat, and religious apocalypse, which provide a new framework for explaining how modern populist leaders weaponize negative emotions to meaningfully influence individual convictions, tribal identities, cultural imaginations, and reactions against outgroups and perceived external threats.

Keywords: fear, threat, political rhetoric

## **Charge the Cockpit or Die: An Anatomy of Fear-Driven Political Rhetoric in American Conservatism**

Two months before the 2016 presidential election, *Claremont Review of Books* published a widely shared editorial by former national security staffer Michael Anton. Writing under the pseudonym Decius Mus – derived from a Roman consul who sacrificed his life for the republic – Anton frames the upcoming electoral clash between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton as “the Flight 93 election.” He calls on American voters to “charge the cockpit or you die. You may die anyway...if you don’t try, death is certain.”<sup>1</sup> In other words: vote for Donald Trump or else a Hillary Clinton presidency will launch a fatal national crisis accomplished through “vindictive persecution” of conservatives, unfettered corruption amongst cultural and political elites, and mass importation of foreigners.<sup>2</sup>

His reference to Flight 93 was surely intentional, as the horrific images of 9/11 will long evoke patriotic sentiments from millions of voting-age Americans. But an inherent danger lies within Publius’ metaphor: he implies his ideological opponents are hijackers – morally abhorrent actors bent on national destruction. Anton does not attack his leftist opponents by simply levying derogatory names against them; instead, his evocative metaphor frames individual votes as far more than basic acts of civic engagement. For Publius Decius Mus, voting is a zero-sum act of war.

Anton’s words ricocheted from the depths of right-wing political culture all the way to the White House. President Trump hired Anton as a staffer for his National Security Council, and top West Wing advisor Steve Bannon named him “one of the most significant intellects in

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<sup>1</sup> Publius Decius Mus, “The Flight 93 Election,” *Claremont Review of Books*, September 5, 2016, <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/digital/the-flight-93-election/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

this nationalist movement.”<sup>3</sup> Anton’s Flight 93 essay was no isolated metaphor; rather, the outsized impact of its fear-driven rhetoric reveals an ever-deepening political fissure.

Reason no longer reigns superior in American public life. Subject experts on any given issue struggle to retain credibility and public trust, for now any man or woman can become a self-proclaimed expert. As British academic William Davies observes, “appealing to objectivity and evidence rarely moves people physically or emotionally.”<sup>4</sup> The frenzied economy of social media instead ensures “the expression of outrage attracts more eyeballs than calmness and rationality.”<sup>5</sup> Emotional rhetoric, especially threatening language that activates negative responses, can more successfully stir human emotions and move people toward political action. Charisma and command have begun to rule the day in American politics.

In such an equation, populist leaders like Donald Trump emerge as significant power players who have successfully recruited and mobilized large and passionate follower bases. Flight 93 rhetoric succeeds not by out-arguing political foes but by playing on human vulnerabilities – namely the negative emotional response of fear.

Research shows that subthreshold negative emotions supersede conscious reason as the initial and strongest motivators of political behavior. When the use of these emotions is observed in political rhetoric, three common characteristics emerge: exaggerated threat, tribal combat, and religious apocalypse. These features provide a new framework to understand how modern populist leaders weaponize negative emotions to meaningfully influence individual convictions,

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<sup>3</sup> Carlos Lozada, “Thinking for Trump,” *Washington Post*, March 15, 2019, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=n5h&AN=wapo.f2583ea2-3c61-11e9-aaae-69364b2ed137&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>4</sup> William Davies, *Nervous States: Democracy and the Decline of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

tribal identities, cultural imaginations, and reactions against outgroups and perceived external threats.

### **The Anatomy of Fear-Driven Rhetoric**

Fear-driven political rhetoric plays on underlying features of human anthropology and can thus effectively arouse individual anger against out-groups. Political actors often sincerely believe their behaviors and beliefs are founded on reason. However, the fields of political neuroscience, psychology, and history evidence that threat-driven rhetoric effectively appeals to an even deeper and more unpredictable part of the human person.

### **Subthreshold Emotion Precedes Cognitive Reason**

Some political philosophers and practitioners have approached politics as a rational exercise for millennia. Plato wanted “the rational part to rule” over both the individual soul and the state.<sup>6</sup> Thomas Hobbes understood the human mind to be a computational machine, capable of adding and subtracting input data to build complex rational syllogisms by which the whole person lives.<sup>7</sup> Rene Descartes considered the refining of reason to be the *telos* of education and ethics.<sup>8</sup>

Rationalistic sentiments formalized by the close of the twentieth century in the development of *rational choice theory*. Rational choice theory contends that “history and culture are irrelevant to understanding political behaviour,” so political observers can consider it

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<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vols. 5 and 6, *Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 4.441e.

<sup>7</sup> Stewart Duncan, “Thomas Hobbes,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/hobbes/>.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Rutherford, “Descartes’ Ethics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/descartes-ethics/>.

“sufficient to know the actors’ interests and to assume that they pursue them rationally.”<sup>9</sup> The rational choice theorist dismisses factors external or tangential to syllogistic reason and individual utility as unnecessary distractions.<sup>10</sup>

Post-modern observers across the academic fields of neuroscience, history, and philosophy began to question the long-standing modern assumption that rationality holds the center of the individual and collective political mind. By the turn of the century, rational choice theory encountered heavy critiques from political scientists who remained unconvinced that mathematized explanations of human decision-making could probe the depths of human political motivations and behaviors.

Recent research has confirmed what even casual observers of human anthropology have known all along: subthreshold emotions precede cognitive reason as the primary driver of human political behavior. Raw self-interest and human reason cannot fully explain why millions of German citizens enabled the tyranny of Adolf Hitler, why traditional conservatives vote for a populist candidate like Donald Trump who does not share their political convictions or character, or why left-wing environmental protestors resort to violence against energy corporations. There must be something deeper.

### ***Neuroscientific Evidence***

Political neuroscience is a multi-disciplinary research field first formalized in 2006. The still-emerging area adapts neuroscientific methods to help navigate questions about human political tendencies and behaviors. Historically, political scientists have relied on qualitative

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<sup>9</sup> Michael G. Roskin, “Theory of Rational Choice,” *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-science/Theory-of-rational-choice>.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Hechter and Satoshi Kanazawa, “Sociological Rational Choice Theory,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 23 (1997): 193-94.

behavior studies to draw conclusions about political tendencies, but such methods have proven limited in power to move beyond general observations about human behavior into meaningful scientific analyses of human biological proclivities. Jost finds that political neuroscience advantages researchers with its “technical sophistication and relatively precise, objective measurements that are less subject to social desirability and self-presentational biases.”<sup>11</sup>

Political neuroscience certainly remains in its infancy when compared to more developed fields, but its most prominent academics have consistently found that subconscious emotions – known as “subthreshold factors” – outpace the influence of conscious reason on individual political temperaments and behaviors.<sup>12</sup> Jost and Amodio write that individuals “often insist that their political decisions are solely the result of conscious considerations,” but research performed in the last two decades counters that the formation of political ideology begins as “motivated social cognition” – subthreshold, preconscious emotion – then finds public expression through partisan identification, negative polarization, and other demonstrable political behaviors.<sup>13</sup>

It is often difficult for political actors to observe their own subthreshold ideological development because ideological requisition lies beneath the realm of cognition and is often gleaned from the individual’s communal and cultural narratives. Ideology “is not acquired by

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<sup>11</sup> John T. Jost, et al. “Political Neuroscience: The Beginning of a Beautiful Friendship,” *Political Psychology* 35 (2014): 4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43783787>.

<sup>12</sup> John R. Hibbing, Kevin B. Smith, and John R. Alford, “Differences in Negativity Bias Underlie Variations in Political Ideology,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 37, no. 3 (06, 2014): 299, <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/liberty.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/differences-negativity-bias-underlie-variations/docview/2637283860/se-2>.

<sup>13</sup> John T. Jost and David M. Amodio, “Political Ideology as Motivated Social Cognition: Behavioral and Neuroscientific Evidence,” *Motivation and Emotion* 36, no. 1 (03, 2012): 55, <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/liberty.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/political-ideology-as-motivated-social-cognition/docview/926345342/se-2>.



thought but by breathing the haunted air.”<sup>14</sup> Individuals and groups often exchange beliefs, priorities, and identities not by intentional, thoughtful transfer but by subconscious emotional appeals and relational connections between communities – a social phenomenon loosely parallel to the scientific process of osmosis.

Subconscious emotions are demonstrably relevant to individual political behavior. This evidence lends to the possibility that political temperament is “systematically related to a range of psychological and physiological response patterns,” not just rational political decisions made in cognitive self-interest.<sup>15</sup>

The somewhat unpredictable influence of human neuroscience appears to play a determining role not only in the formation of individual policy convictions but also in the development of political identities that guard against perceived existential threats. Jost and Amodio find that, among other factors, individuals form political ideologies to “cope with anxiety concerning one’s own mortality through denial, rationalization, and other defense mechanisms.”<sup>16</sup> Hogg agrees that personal ideologies “arise under uncertainty and prevail to ward off uncertainty.”<sup>17</sup> Political approaches do not suddenly appear from a logical vacuum devoid of emotion and formative stimuli; rather, subconscious biases, emotions, and defensive responses all contribute to form the political actor in ways he may never know.

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<sup>14</sup> Lionel Trilling, “Contemporary American Literature in Its Relation to Ideas,” *American Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (1949): 199, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2710713>.

<sup>15</sup> Hibbing, Smith, and Alford, “Differences,” 299.

<sup>16</sup> Jost and Amodio, “Political Ideology,” 56.

<sup>17</sup> Michael A. Hogg, “Uncertainty-Identity Theory,” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 39 (2007), 103, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(06\)39002-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(06)39002-8).

### *Philosophical Evidence*

After surviving a close encounter with a frightened horse, Gustave Le Bon spent years researching crowd psychology. In his seminal work *The Crowd*, the French polymath concluded that the actions of individuals in a crowd reveal the primitive impulses that govern their political behavior when divorced from common sense and time to yield. Crowds are “guided almost exclusively by unconscious motives” and are “far more under the influence of the spinal cord” – the nervous system – than the mind.<sup>18</sup> The brain can consider inputs and respond rationally, but the nervous system just reacts. Politics is a hospitable environment for these sorts of reactions, as the field often demands quick responses to sort and address rapidly approaching stimuli. This paves a wide path for human instincts to take over the body’s plan of response.

Christian ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr expanded on Le Bon’s findings by contrasting individual morality and collective immorality. To Niebuhr, individuals generally retain rational commitments to their moral ideals, but when joining an angry mob, they often cast off their once rational stances in favor of more attractive collective lusts for power and survival.<sup>19</sup> Atticus Finch may have said it best on Broadway: “a mob is a place where people go to take a break from their conscience.”<sup>20</sup>

Political neuroscience and philosophers agree it is not as rational thinkers but as feeling creatures that humans fall prey to the sentiments that primarily form political convictions, group

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<sup>18</sup> Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (United Kingdom: T.F. Unwin, 1903), 40, [https://www.google.com/books/edition/The\\_Crowd/W65BGyzD8nkC?hl=en&gbpv=0](https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Crowd/W65BGyzD8nkC?hl=en&gbpv=0).

<sup>19</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 9.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Marks, “A Resonant ‘Mockingbird’ Recalls American Racism Then — and Now,” *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/theater-dance/2022/06/23/mockingbird-kennedy-center-richard-thomas/>.

identities, and civic action.<sup>21</sup> Consider the advertising industry: after the advent of photographs, slogans, and jingles, nineteenth-century marketers abandoned any pretense of appealing to rational sentiments. “Advertising became one part depth psychology, one part aesthetic theory,” recounts Neil Postman. “Reason had to move itself to other arenas.”<sup>22</sup> The same is true in politics, where rational choice lags behind the outsized influence of subthreshold emotion on individual and group political behavior.

### **Negative Emotions Drive Political Behavior**

Anthropological and psychological evidence further reveals that negative emotions precognitively shape individual political behaviors. Ideological formation can be subconsciously affected by fearful responses to perceived threats, as the presence of fearful emotions can quickly derail otherwise rational political behaviors in favor of irrational, self-protective actions and associations.

A psychological theory known as *negativity bias* provides a coherent explanation of why fear is so effective at mobilizing human attention. A broadly accepted definition of the term states that “the negative is more causally potent than the positive.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, negative stimuli outpace positive stimuli in their ability to draw quicker and stronger reactions. Reactions to negative stimuli then claim priority in human decision making.

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<sup>21</sup> Davies, *Nervous States*, 166.

<sup>22</sup> Postman, 60.

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Corns, "Rethinking the Negativity Bias," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 9, no. 3 (09, 2018): 608, <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/liberty.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/rethinking-negativity-bias/docview/1994210501/se-2>.

Developmental psychology shows that negativity bias “guides human cognition as early as infancy and continues throughout childhood.”<sup>24</sup> Several studies by Kinzler, Vaish, and Shutts test the respective response times and behaviors of infants exposed to positive and negative stimuli. Kinzler and Vaish found that exposing infants to pictures of fearful faces succeeded in holding their attention longer and more intensely than after exposure to encouraging faces.<sup>25</sup> The same pattern holds in a slightly more advanced age group: Kinzler and Shutts found that preschool-aged children excel at remembering faces perceived as threats.<sup>26</sup> These discoveries about early childhood temperament appear to continue through an individual’s psychological development into adulthood. Adults, not just children, are subject to the impacts of negativity bias. Negative emotions therefore contribute heavily to the formation of adults’ political ideologies.<sup>27</sup>

The especially formative stimuli are not just limited to generally negative information but specifically information that is personally threatening to the individual.<sup>28</sup> The American Psychological Association defines a *threat* as a “condition that is appraised as a danger to one’s

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<sup>24</sup> Katherine D. Kinzler and Amrisha Vaish, "Political Infants? Developmental Origins of the Negativity Bias," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 37, no. 3 (06, 2014): 318, <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/liberty.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/political-infants-developmental-origins/docview/2637288673/se-2>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Katherine D. Kinzler and Kristin Shutts, “Memory for ‘Mean’ Over ‘Nice’: The Influence of Threat on Children’s Face Memory,” *Cognition* 107 no. 2 (2008): 775–783, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2007.09.005>.

<sup>27</sup> Other relevant studies include Block & Block 2006, Fraley et. al 2012, and Hibbing et. al 2014. Note that these studies primarily analyze parental styles to predict whether the child will eventually hold to a liberal or conservative ideology. More relevant to the research at hand are their secondary findings mentioned above that childhood negativity bias helps predict future susceptibility to threatening political rhetoric. Researchers should heed the warning of Hibbing et. al that genetic and behavioral research is limited in its power to explain such a complex trait as political ideology. The current research on this subject is better fit to apply negativity bias to political temperament than attempting to isolate such a nebulous variable to predict party or ideology affiliation.

<sup>28</sup> Kinzler and Shutts, “Memory.”

self or well-being or to a group.”<sup>29</sup> Note that threats are not inherently dangerous; rather, they are perceptions sensed to be dangerous by individuals, crowds, ideological tribes, and ethnic or religious groups.

Threats are not one-dimensional, as individuals can face threats to an *existential reality* or a *system of meaning and value*.<sup>30</sup> Crawford argues that threats to existential realities are physical and concrete. These include death threats and perceived risks of physical harm.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, threats to systems of meaning and value more abstractly violate “one’s senses of belonging, identity, purpose, significance, continuity, or certainty.”<sup>32</sup> Political and ideological disagreements typically fall into the latter category, especially for laymen voters otherwise uninvolved in formal political processes. Unfortunately, political actors are often incentivized to rhetorically conflate value threats as a potent form of physical threats.<sup>33</sup>

Another psychological concept known as *terror management theory* explains this vulnerability to both kinds of external threats as a natural, self-protective reaction. Proponents of the theory argue that “existential anxiety, fear of death, motivates affiliation and other behaviors aimed at buffering this anxiety.”<sup>34</sup> Terror management theory is one application of the broader

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<sup>29</sup> *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, s.v. “threat,” April 19, 2018, <https://dictionary.apa.org/threat>.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas A. Pyszczynski, Jeff Greenburg, and Sander Leon Koole. *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology* (New York: Guilford Press, 2004); The contents of this psychological dictionary are structured around the two categories of “existential realities” and “systems of meaning and value.” Jarret Crawford cites these two categories as psychological and sociological locations that typically produce perceived political threats.

<sup>31</sup> Jarret T. Crawford, “Are Conservatives More Sensitive to Threat than Liberals? It Depends on How We Define Threat and Conservatism,” *Social Cognition* 35, no. 4 (08, 2017): 356, <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/liberty.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/are-conservatives-more-sensitive-threat-than/docview/1920044045/se-2>.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> This phenomenon is further explored in this paper’s later section on exaggerated political threats.

<sup>34</sup> Hogg, “Uncertainty-Identity Theory,” 109.

concept of inconsistency compensation, which posits that individuals seek palliative compensation when they experience something contrary to expectations.<sup>35</sup> When an individual feels under attack, especially in a public realm like politics, he is likely to respond from an equally vehement position of attack in order to protect his own physical safety or value-based interests. In many ways, fear drives the vector – the magnitude and direction – of human political behavior.

This kind of fear-driven rhetoric has always been dangerous but never more so than in the technological age. Terror management theory recognizes that fear changes human political behavior by incentivizing quick takes and emotional outbursts against perceived outgroups. It is precisely the helpful nature of feelings – “their immediacy” – that also renders them “potentially misleading, spawning overreactions and fear.”<sup>36</sup> The speed of mobile tech and social media does nothing but reward immediate reactions while simultaneously allowing “less time for reflection or dispassionate analysis.”

Before defining the primary characteristics of fear-driven rhetoric in politics, one must first explore major philosophical arguments that explain why human responses are so vulnerable to perceived threats. Evolutionary psychology and Christian anthropology offer two primary explanations to account for the staying power of the theories of negativity bias and terror management.

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<sup>35</sup> Travis Proulx, Michael Inzlicht, and Eddie Harmon-Jones, “Understanding All Inconsistency Compensation as a Palliative Response to Violated Expectations,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 16, no. 5 (May 2012): 285, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2012.04.002>.

<sup>36</sup> Davies, *Nervous States*, xiii.

### *Evolutionary Explanation*

Much of the existing literature explains these phenomena through the theory of evolution. Evolutionary pioneer Charles Darwin believed that emotions are not unique to humanity but rather are found in less evolved forms across the animal kingdom. In his tome *The Descent of Man*, Darwin compares the fear found in human religious devotion to a dog's fear of his master's punishment.<sup>37</sup> Pages later, he describes a pointer dog's unstoppable hunting instincts as a lesser form of man's fearful instincts, then names natural selection as the primary driver of the evolutionary development of core human traits.<sup>38</sup> Darwin saw men as highly evolved animals; thus, he viewed human responses to fear as survival instincts, not unlike rudimentary 'fight or flight' responses shared by animal cousins. Fear is a way to live another day.

Modern evolutionary psychologists operate from these Darwinian assumptions about human nature. The previously mentioned study about preschoolers who excel at remembering threatening faces also attributes fearful reactions as a positive trait of evolutionary survival, citing that "this memory advantage could be indicative of a system rooted deeply in cognitive evolution to track and remember individuals who have been harmful in the past and therefore might be harmful again."<sup>39</sup> LoBue also argues from an evolutionary perspective to assert that individuals with quick reaction times to perceived threats are "more likely to escape potentially dangerous situations and hence survive to reproduce."<sup>40</sup> Some political neuroscientists employ

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<sup>37</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1889), 95-96.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>39</sup> Kinzler & Shutts, "Memory," 775.

<sup>40</sup> Vanessa LoBue, "More than Just Another Face in the Crowd: Superior Detection of Threatening Facial Expressions in Children and Adults," *Developmental Science* 12, no. 2 (2009): 305, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7687.2008.00767.x>.

this evolutionary anthropology when analyzing the purpose of fear-driven political rhetoric. McDermott posits that leaders “manipulate emotions in the body politics” to mobilize followers toward group survival in ways that advance the leader’s self-interests and personal power.<sup>41</sup>

### ***Biblical Explanation***

Christian scholarship acknowledges some insights of evolutionary psychology, namely the conviction that fearful responses emerge from human nature. While evolutionary psychology rightly understands that self-interest influences fear-driven rhetoric, Christianity counters Darwinist anthropology with a radically different, fully integrated vision of human design, purpose, and motivations.

Many current sociological observers view humans either as “social animals” or “complex information processing machines.”<sup>42</sup> Christian anthropology rejects such mind-soul dualism as a denigration of divine design. Throughout history, Christians have not just viewed man as an ideal, Aristotelian rational beings but rather as a holistic “heart-soul-mind-strength complex designed for love.”<sup>43</sup> Since the genesis of the ancient Abrahamic faith, Christians have known that man is complex in nature, for he possesses both a rational, finite mind and an immortal, spiritual soul. The latter faculty undergirds man’s unpredictable, subconscious emotions and provides its great “capacity for the divine.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Rose McDermott, “Leadership and the Strategic Emotional Manipulation of Political Identity: An Evolutionary Perspective,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (April 2020): 2. doi:10.1016/j.leafqua.2018.11.005.

<sup>42</sup> Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Koole, *Handbook*, 14.

<sup>43</sup> Andy Crouch, *The Life We’re Looking For* (New York: Convergent, 2022), 45.

<sup>44</sup> Giulio Maspero, *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, eds. Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Giulio Maspero, trans. Seth Cherney (Leiden, Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV), 38.



Saint Augustine believed that the capacity to reason fundamentally distinguishes man from animals.<sup>45</sup> But in an early rebuttal of the hyper-rationalistic spirit that would eventually characterize the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, Augustine hinted that human experiences birth spiritual longings – which he often referred to as desires – that cannot be suppressed or explained by pure reason.

Desire itself often proves to be stronger than reason. In Augustine’s autobiographical *Confessions*, the African church father writes that desires are “not content to take second place.” They “attempt to take precedence and forge ahead” of “their due, as adjuncts to reason.”<sup>46</sup> Augustine is right: human emotions have sought to supersede reason since Adam and Eve’s great sin in the Garden of Eden. Even John Steinbeck knew that “the soul capable of the greatest good is also capable of the greatest evil.”<sup>47</sup> Augustine recognizes this divinely crafted nature and “shifts the center of human identity” from the head to the heart, from rational cognition to the subconscious soul. For Augustine, humans do not “inhabit the world as thinkers or cognitive machines” but instead as “affective, embodied creatures who make our way in the world more by feeling our way around it.”<sup>48</sup>

The works of Gregory of Nyssa further confirm Augustine’s biblical proposition that the spiritual soul and rational mind are the fundamental units that uniquely distinguish all human

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<sup>45</sup> St. Augustine, *On Order [De Ordine]*, trans. Silvano Borruso (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2007), 11.31.

<sup>46</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (London, England: Penguin Books, 1961), 10.33.

<sup>47</sup> John Steinbeck, *Tortilla Flat*, in *The Short Novels of John Steinbeck*, Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2009), 28.

<sup>48</sup> James K.A. Smith and Glen Stassen, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 47, 63.

beings. This unique combination of the spiritual and nature, the rational and the emotional, elevates man to “assume a unique position” as the “lord and goal of creation.”<sup>49</sup>

Among others, these Christian scholars advance a convincing argument that emotions arise from man’s complex nature at the nexus of the soul and body, not from supposed evolutionary, animalistic survival instincts. The Augustinian vision of the holistic person consisting of an integrated mind, body, and soul reveals that cold, rational politics cannot quench created human longings for community, affirmation, safety, and freedom.

This is what makes fear-based rhetoric so effective in the realm of politics. Most modern politicians, especially populists, are learning how to successfully appeal to subconscious negative emotions of threat and fear. These leaders employ fear-driven rhetoric not because they seek evolutionary survival but because their hearts and souls desire to obtain glory and power for themselves. They present themselves as ‘political messiahs’ because they know that the human heart longs to be delivered from their greatest fears. Fear takes advantage of the deepest vulnerabilities and desires of the human heart, and there is no shortage of ways that political actors can weaponize these created vulnerabilities for their own advantage.

### **Three Characteristics of Fear-Driven Political Rhetoric**

Before exploring several key characteristics of fear-driven political rhetoric, one should note that conservatives appear to be generally more susceptible than liberals to the extremes of fear-driven rhetoric. Crawford asks: “Are political conservatives more sensitive to threat than political liberals? The dominant perspectives within political psychology suggest that the answer

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<sup>49</sup> Maspero, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 39.

is ‘yes.’”<sup>50</sup> Wilson finds that conservatives’ temperaments are typically marked by a tendency to experience fear or anxiety when confronted by a potential threat.<sup>51</sup> Budner agrees that conservatives generally have authoritarian-prone cognitive styles, so they tend to support more authoritarian and confident leaders in order to resolve situational ambiguity.<sup>52</sup> This palliative penchant finds parallels in the psychological phenomenon of *uncertainty avoidance*, which holds that humans will seek to resolve uncertainty even at high cost to their own community.<sup>53</sup>

The development of politically conservative ideology has been specifically linked to expressions of fear of external physical threats. Further research from Crawford finds that conservatives respond more strongly to negative political stimuli including “outgroups,” “disgusting or purity-violating events/stimuli,” “uncertainty and ambiguity,” and “unpleasant and surprising auditory prompts.”<sup>54</sup> Jost and Amodio reminded focus group participants of external threats and found that doing so “increases their approval of politically conservative leaders” and “attitudes.”<sup>55</sup> Apparently, the very presence of threat-driven rhetoric either drives individuals rightward or disproportionately affects individuals already on the political right.

The political left is also certainly subject to fear-driven rhetoric – look no further than progressive cultural narratives like *The Handmaid’s Tale* – but threatening language does appear to exert disproportionate effects on political conservatives. As such, the following review will

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<sup>50</sup> Crawford, “Threat and Conservatism,” 354.

<sup>51</sup> Glenn Wilson, *The Psychology of Conservatism* (London: Academic Press, 1973), 259.

<sup>52</sup> Stanley Budner, “Intolerance of Ambiguity as a Personality Variable,” *Journal of Personality* 30 (1962): 30-31, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.1962.tb02303.x>.

<sup>53</sup> Wilson, *Psychology*, 259.

<sup>54</sup> Crawford, “Threat and Conservatism,” 355.

<sup>55</sup> Jost and Amodio, “Political Ideology,” 58.

largely use examples from right-wing politics with a special focus on the religious metaphors of conservative evangelicalism.

Political neuroscience shows that fear-driven rhetoric plays an outsized role in human political behavior, and political commentary identifies many negative effects of threatening language, but few published works clearly collate visible characteristics of fear-driven political rhetoric. To fill this gap in existing research, the following sections will bridge the theoretical and practical by offering three broad characteristics that mark fear-driven political rhetoric.

### **Exaggerated Threat**

Fear-driven rhetoric is often first characterized by the presence of an *exaggerated threat*. This phenomenon occurs when political actors coopt language of physical threat to describe political beliefs and actions performed by an ideological or demographic outgroup.

Exaggerated threats impact the subthreshold imagination not by appealing conscious reason but by use of strategic metaphors. The politics of fear shapes human political behavior through *emotional discourses*, which are narratives and metaphors that “commend specific cultural, behavioral, and affective responses to the sociopolitical issues it criticizes.”<sup>56</sup> These emotional discourses include vivid cultural metaphors, narratives, images, and shared sentiments. Technology critic Neil Postman agrees that “metaphor is the generative force...to unify and invest with meaning a variety of attitudes or experiences.”<sup>57</sup> This is especially true in politics, where metaphors and narratives subconsciously shape the way that humans organize political ideologies, set advocacy priorities, and define both opportunities and threats. By weaponizing

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<sup>56</sup> Jason Bivins, *Religion of Fear: The Politics of Horror in Conservative Evangelicalism* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 9.

<sup>57</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 17-18.

compelling emotional discourses and metaphors, leaders can successfully direct human emotional responses against external threats for their own political purposes.

One primary emotional discourse especially relevant to political rhetoric is the metaphor of war. War-time terminology such as *combat*, *attack*, *fight*, *battlefield*, *soldier*, and *crusade* are commonly used in political speeches and campaign email blasts. This language often finds a home in the practice of *culture warring*. James Davison Hunter, who first conceived the term in his 1991 book, observes that the 1960s realignment of American culture, religion, and socio-economics generated significant inter-group antagonisms expressed in each sub-culture's "public symbols," "myths," and "discourse."<sup>58</sup> Culture war rhetoric appears in both partisan sub-cultures, but when specifically applied to the political right, it frames opposing ideas as an attack on conservative values, mostly in issues of cultural concern like abortion, homosexuality, transgenderism, diversity initiatives, and the family.

In one recent example, Florida governor and former presidential candidate Ron DeSantis spoke to a large crowd of Liberty University students on the eve of his campaign launch, urging the young adults in attendance to "wage a war on woke" because "woke represents a war on truth."<sup>59</sup> DeSantis appropriated combat terminology as well as the entire metaphor of embattlement, in which an agent of moral good takes up arms to defend its home territory against unprovoked attacks from an agent of moral evil. He presented wokeness as the natural opposite

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<sup>58</sup> James Davison Hunter and Alan Wolfe, *Is There a Culture War?: A Dialogue on Values and American Public Life* (Blue Ridge Summit: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 13.

<sup>59</sup> Jacob Couch, "Gov. Ron DeSantis Tells LU Students He Will Continue Fighting 'War on Truth,'" Liberty University Office of Communications & Public Engagement, April 14, 2023, <https://www.liberty.edu/news/2023/04/14/gov-ron-desantis-tells-lu-students-he-will-continue-fighting-war-on-truth/>.

of truth, leaving war – or at least an ideological clash – as the inevitable and desirable consequence.

Typical partisan disagreements often struggle to evoke strong and vivid enough emotions to drive the levels of passionate political involvement often required for candidates to win popular election. Many politicians have now learned to spin ideological differences as real, dangerous threats, for they know that “the hyperbole of threat, and particularly existential threat, is the most powerful fuel” that can drive impassioned political action.<sup>60</sup> Crawford argues that these two types of threats appear to “arouse differential emotional responses” in political actors: apparent threats to systems of meaning and value – especially political ideologies – induce anxious uncertainty, but perceived threats to physical safety are more likely to produce the stronger emotion of fear.<sup>61</sup>

When politicians like Desantis exaggerate values threats to the level of physical threats, they capture and weaponize human emotional response mechanisms that are designed to ward away physical harm. Politicians who use war-time language to draw parallels between ideological politics and physical war encourage their followers to respond as if the values threat is actually physical. Wartime rhetoric “incentivizes a never-ending culture war to capture the state and use it” for its own purposes, for it makes the leader’s chosen issue or election appear far more pressing and urgent than if it were simply perceived as a political disagreement.<sup>62</sup> Politicians know that important issues must be framed with rhetoric of physical threat or

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<sup>60</sup> Steven Hobfoll, *Tribalism: The Evolutionary Origins of Fear Politics* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 4.

<sup>61</sup> Crawford, “Threat and Conservatism,” 356.

<sup>62</sup> Paul Miller, *The Religion of American Greatness: What’s Wrong with Christian Nationalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 88.

constituent passion may weaken. If this one battle is lost, then the entire war – and perhaps even the nation and its core values – may soon slip away without constant vigilance on the home front.

Michael Anton’s Flight 93 metaphor is a clear example of this phenomenon. Anton portrays the 2016 presidential election as the decisive battle in the colossal fight to save the American republic. His message is clear: vote for Trump – “storm the cockpit” – or abstain from voting and elect Clinton – a depraved hijacker armed with metaphorical semi-automatic weapons and bent on destroying American conservatives. If Trump loses, “death is certain.”<sup>63</sup> Under the trance of such an evocative combat metaphor, elections are viewed as battles, representatives are elected as generals, concerned voters are drafted as ideological foot soldiers, and leaders of the opposing party are labeled Nazis, fascists, or worse. Politics becomes war, and any internal disagreements are treated as desertion.

This zero-sum game of exaggerated threats can incite violent responses. Anxious crowds can become captured in a “vicious circle of fear, in which the perception of threats is amplified and anxiety grows, until the mere feeling of violence produces actual violence.”<sup>64</sup> Minutes before angry throngs of election protesters stormed the Capitol building on January 6, 2020, President Trump ordered them to “fight like hell” over his stolen election, or they were “not going to have a country anymore.”<sup>65</sup> His followers took his words at face value. The president and his legal team later argued that his words only referenced political warfare, but the damage was already

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<sup>63</sup> Publius Decius Mus, “Flight 93.”

<sup>64</sup> Davies, *Nervous States*, 16-17.

<sup>65</sup> Final Report of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, 117<sup>th</sup> Cong, 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 2022. H. Report 117-663, 577. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-J6-REPORT/pdf/GPO-J6-REPORT-2-7.pdf>.

wrought. When political influencers like Trump constantly frame politics as war, their followers may naturally attempt to foist the very weapons of war.

This is why politicians often receive credible death threats following an unpopular vote – or even for voicing their preferred candidate for Speaker of the House, as U.S. Representative Mariannette Miller-Meeke experienced after declining to support leading candidate Jim Jordan.<sup>66</sup> These sorts of tiffs are not even worthy of rising to the level of values threats, for they fail to impact everyday American life in any significant way. Even so, political actors have great practical incentive to inform concerned citizens that everyday votes present threats equivalent to physical harm.

One recurring problem befalls rhetoric of exaggerated threat: the war never ends. Several years after the original article’s release, Anton authored a book that extended the Flight 93 metaphor beyond the election. As one media critic reflected on the book: “Flight 93 did not end with the 2016 vote; we are forever on the plane, endlessly in danger, no matter who has seized the controls.”<sup>67</sup> Resonant political metaphors rarely disappear. Rather, political actors will seek to maintain metaphors of exaggerated threat as long as the emotional discourses prove effective to stir followers’ imaginations toward reactions of fear. George Orwell proves as much in his fictional nation of Oceania. There, national rhetoric perpetually hails the threat of foreign war to keep citizens constantly fearful of external opposition and ignorant of internal trouble.<sup>68</sup> When a

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<sup>66</sup> Moria Warburton, “US House Lawmaker Receives Death Threats After Voting Against Jordan for Speaker,” Reuters, October 19, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-house-lawmaker-receives-death-threats-after-voting-against-jordan-speaker-2023-10-18/>.

<sup>67</sup> Lozada, “Thinking for Trump.”

<sup>68</sup> George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1983), 31.



war ends – win or lose – political leaders turn their aim on another enemy – true or imagined – to keep public attention, tribal loyalty, and zeal for the cause alive.

### **Tribal Combat**

Once political threats are exaggerated as physical threats, the threats are often given directions and enemies. In rhetoric of tribal combat, enemy outgroup forces are seen to be waging war not just against the values of the ingroup but against the ingroup itself. Research in the field of political neuroscience again confirms that personally directed threats activate strong, vivid responses of fear and anger. As Schaller and Neuberg find, “threat-based prejudices are amplified when people perceive themselves to be vulnerable to the specific form of threat.”<sup>69</sup>

Politicians often leverage this part of human nature to convince their followers that external threatening actors are targeting their tribe. *Political tribes* can be defined as a self-identified demographic that organizes itself formally or informally around cultural, racial, economic, religious, or ideological boundaries and identifiers. White evangelicals, working-class Catholics, African-American liberals, and urban environmentalists are just a few examples of political tribes. The leaders of a given tribe can motivate their members toward action by stoking fear relevant to the attributes, characteristics, and values of the group. For example, *Fox News* often spends hours covering issues like the border crisis and economic depression. The choice to platform these specific issues “seems to reflect [the fear] of the audience it most serves – white middle and working-class people” who may feel threatened by apparent threats of illegal

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<sup>69</sup> Mark Schaller and Steven L. Neuberg, “Beyond Prejudice to Prejudices,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 35, no. 6 (2012): 445–46, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X12001306>.

immigration and financial ruin.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, on the left, MSNBC has historically labeled “the Republicans” as a group far more than they discussed their own party, often castigating the conservative outgroup as culturally backward and regressive.<sup>71</sup>

Donald Trump’s populist rhetoric is again paradigmatic here. The former president has found sustained success at least in part because he portrays himself as the last line of defense, the only one who is willing to bravely guard his supporters from leftist attacks. “In the end, they're not coming after me,” Trump offered in a common refrain. “They're coming after you — and I'm just standing in their way.”<sup>72</sup> Trump has created and retained his loyal following by stoking tribal fears for which he alone is the solution. He has painted his supporters as a terrified remnant helpless in face of leftist assault then presented himself as their suffering yet triumphal messiah.

To properly understand rhetoric of tribal combat in the public square today, it is important to review its presuppositions and ideological influences, which includes Darwin, Machiavelli, and Marx. The contributions of each worldview serve to highlight how this kind of rhetoric borrows false and dangerous conceptions of human nature.

Tribal combat rhetoric first borrows from Social Darwinism, which holds that the strong will – and should – defeat the weak. It then affirms Machiavelli’s application of evolutionary power dynamics to politics, which rewards political conquests as virtuous endeavors. For both Darwin and Machiavelli, virtue consists of strength, power, and savvy to survive above the

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<sup>70</sup> Arlie Russell Hoschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (La Vergne: The New Press, 2018), 127.

<sup>71</sup> Brock Ashton Terwilliger, “Bias in Hard News Articles from Fox News and MSNBC: An Empirical Assessment Using the Gramulator,” *Memphis University Electronic Theses and Dissertations* 196 (2011): 38. <https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd/196>.

<sup>72</sup> Matt Dixon, “Trump Delivers Fiery Post-Indictment Speech: ‘They're Coming After You,’” NBC News, June 10, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-deliver-fiery-post-indictment-speech-georgia-rcna88561>.

traditional and biblical virtues of character and wisdom. Dominant exercises of power are not only virtuous but are necessary for class survival.

Rhetoric of tribal combat then broadens the scope of Machiavellian politics from individuals to tribal class identities – economic, social, religious, ethnic, and geographic. Taking its cue from the class wars that define Marxist political thought, this rhetoric places tribal identities at the center of all political sentiments and behaviors. When a tribe experiences perceived persecution or suppression, they will lash out in anger against social elites and leaders of privileged outgroups. A Marxist sense of collective victimhood can quickly lead to violence against perceived aggressors.<sup>73</sup>

Leaders who employ the rhetoric of tribal combat capture war-time metaphors to justify their political behaviors as necessary in such a zero-sum, high-stakes game. This can often lead parties and public figures to excuse or defend poor leadership or their tribe as a necessary evil or better than an external alternative. The Flight 93 metaphor acknowledges that “you – or the leader or your party – may make it into the cockpit and not know how to fly or land the plane.”<sup>74</sup> But if politics is war and opposing actors are hijackers, it is preferable to risk a crash at the hands of your own leader than give in to the malicious misdirection of tribal opponents. A tribe under attack cannot risk pausing the flight to assess its internal health or fire a flawed general. This is why President Trump’s critics have faced intense pushback within the Republican party: time and loyalty are crucial to victory in war, so any acts of critical self-reflection can only be seen as disloyal attacks on the tribe itself.

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<sup>73</sup> Davies, *Nervous States*, 20.

<sup>74</sup> Publius Decius Mus, “Flight 93.”

One of the most effective – and dangerous – features of tribal rhetoric is that leaders can leverage it as a tool to unite unstable or broad constituencies. Warnings of external threats can help “divide and conquer potentially destabilizing groups” within a leader’s own voting bloc.<sup>75</sup> Donald Trump again serves as a prime example here. Past Republican candidates like John McCain and Mitt Romney struggled to engage both evangelicals and populist activists, as these primary major constituencies within the party often approached politics for fundamentally different reasons. Trump naturally appealed to many party activists with his promises to gut the administrative state and wield state power for populist ends, but he also broke the mold by gaining eighty-one percent of the white evangelical vote in 2016 – surpassing levels of evangelical support reached by the more traditional candidates of Bush, McCain, and Romney.<sup>76</sup> Trump managed to unite these crosscutting coalitions under an “umbrella of hatred, fear, or anger” at the approaching danger of the woke agenda and political leftists, an “out-group that is suggested by the leader to pose a threat to an overarching value.”<sup>77</sup> Many evangelicals and populists saw Donald Trump as a flawed leader who could nonetheless stand tall against the ultimate external threat to their tribe. Retaining hope of defeating an existential threat appeared to be a more viable option than ousting their own tribal leader.

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<sup>75</sup> McDermott, “Leadership,” 2-3.

<sup>76</sup> Jessica Martinez and Gregory A. Smith, “How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis,” Pew Research, November 9, 2016. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>.

<sup>77</sup> McDermott, “Leadership,” 2-3.

## Religious Apocalypse

Finally, many cultural paradigms of tribal combat have been framed by the religious paradigm of *apocalypse*. Fiery billboards and itinerant street preachers warning of impending judgment may have cheapened apocalypse to the public, but the concept's theological centrality and visual dynamism has shaped the imaginations and political behavior of millions of conservative evangelical and fundamentalist Christians.

The literary genre of apocalypse includes “revelatory literature with a narrative framework” which discloses a “transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.”<sup>78</sup> Jewish apocalypses like Daniel, 1 Enoch, 2 Baruch, and 4 Ezra, as well as the New Testament prophetic apocalypse of Revelation, are prominent examples of this literary bridge between the physical and spiritual worlds. Each work – especially the end-of-world judgment scenarios portrayed in Revelation – speaks prophetically to address a specific historical context but also steps away from the world to see it from a different perspective.<sup>79</sup>

Centrally, the apocalyptic genre is marked by the promise – or threat – of a dramatic and decisive divine interruption of human history after a long decline. The spiritual realm will crash headlong into the physical world, immediately and permanently changing the direction of history. Since John transcribed his divine vision on Patmos at the end of the first century, Christians have increasingly hoped that Jesus Christ will one day return victoriously to enact apocalyptic judgment on evil and achieve eschatological salvation for his saints. The specific details of this divine return, though, have been understood by believers in different ways.

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<sup>78</sup> Collins, “Introduction,” 9.

<sup>79</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 7.

In the nineteenth century, Briton theologian John Nelson Darby disrupted centuries of amillennial theological dominance to propose that the prophecies of Revelation should be read according to a detailed pre-millennial eschatological timeline. His vivid descriptions of a sudden rapture – an apocalyptic event inferred from 1 Thessalonians 4:17 – literal seven-year tribulation, geopolitical anti-Christ, and victorious return of Christ soon found a natural doctrinal home in American evangelicalism. There, global crises like the World Wars and the Cold War reinforced Darby’s framework and “pointed, for some, to a coming apocalypse.”<sup>80</sup> For the first time, the entire world witnessed the dangers of unfettered authoritarianism and saw horrible images of wartime atrocities. Many Americans searched for an ideology that could explain current global events in light of a future hope. Even some disaffected modernists began to consider that evangelicals had been right after all about the possibility of a world-ending apocalyptic event or final judgment.<sup>81</sup>

Rapture fiction erupted in popularity as the nation’s popular imagination began to embrace apocalypse. Eager evangelicals and their intrigued neighbors flocked in droves to shelve apocalyptic novels like Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1973), Frank Peretti’s *This Present Darkness* (1986), and Tim LaHaye’s *Left Behind* (1995-2007) series. Apocalyptic fiction has now dominated the evangelical fiction market for decades due to its dual hermeneutic, which “[looks] to a Darbyite reading of the scriptures on the one hand, with an anxious eye on global political intrigue on the other.”<sup>82</sup> Such literature ameliorates human proclivities toward

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<sup>80</sup> Michael Guest, “Keeping the End in Mind: Left Behind, the Apocalypse and the Evangelical Imagination,” *Literature & Theology* 26, no. 4 (2012): 475.

<sup>81</sup> Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 7.

<sup>82</sup> Guest, “End,” 7.

uncertainty avoidance by serving as modern day prophetic apocalypses, interpreting fearsome and unpredictable current events through its confident interpretations of eschatological scripture passages. Bivins agrees that the urgent growth of apocalyptic fiction “represents a response to geopolitical trends like the proliferation of nuclear weapons, protracted conflicts in the Middle East...and the advent of a global economy, which seems to many interpreters to fulfill central portions of prophecy.”<sup>83</sup> Many evangelical readers feel proud of their newfound status as the prophetic conscience of the nation and confident in the ability of this dramatic eschatological narrative to clarify their approach to their unraveling, post-Christian culture.

Evangelicals have responded to this resurgence in apocalyptic metaphors in varied ways. Many have positively integrated the doctrine of the coming biblical judgment and salvation into their political behavior. To them, politics is a helpful avenue to affect positive social change and practice biblical love of neighbor, yet its eternal impact is ultimately limited by God’s apocalyptic promise of judgment and restoration. True apocalyptic literature seeks to “maintain the faith of God’s people in the one, all-powerful and righteous God in the face of the harsh realities of evil in the world.”<sup>84</sup> When read rightly, eschatological Scripture passages and modern apocalyptic fiction remind evangelicals that no cultural animosity or political marginalization can dethrone Jesus from his eternal, heavenly throne. Dallas Willard writes that “Jesus...brings us into a world without fear. In his world, astonishingly, there is nothing evil we must do in order to thrive.”<sup>85</sup> Evangelicals need not fear any political threats when they remember Jesus will return as king.

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<sup>83</sup> Bivins, “Religion of Fear,” 169-170.

<sup>84</sup> Bauckham, *Theology*, 8.

<sup>85</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 84.

But metaphors of apocalypse can also derail the political engagement of other, more fundamentalist evangelicals. Consider again the danger of the Flight 93 metaphor: Publius' threat of national apocalypse not only exaggerates values threats and reinforces metaphors of tribal combat, but it also applies religious verbiage – and ergo, magnified spiritual significance – to electoral politics. Whether it is Donald Trump claiming he alone can save our country or Joe Biden clamoring to save democracy, our leaders can more easily justify tribal combat rhetoric when clothed in religious language (good versus evil, moral conviction, and supernatural zeal).

One consequence of the political use of religious terms and metaphors is that it maps the religious categories of saint and sinner – heavenly and demonic, good and evil – onto political identities and conflicts. Scripture clearly establishes the elect church and the unsaved world as opposing spiritual categories, but these salvific statuses can become dangerous when wrongly applied to define the boundaries and relationships of political tribes. Just as the “Flight 93 and 9/11 cultural mythology partakes in a structural system of division between us and them, the good guys and the evil enemies,” so does the over-spiritualization of political conflicts entrench partisan hatred and incentivize radical reactions against perceived enemies.<sup>86</sup>

Such binary political applications often appeal to fundamentalists, who are naturally drawn to black-and-white scenarios by the previously mentioned tendency toward uncertainty avoidance and negativity bias. This is how nationalists and populists like top Trump advisor Steve Bannon can call on “the church militant” to “fight for our beliefs against this new barbarity” that threatens to “completely eradicate everything that we’ve been bequeathed over

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<sup>86</sup> Jason L. Mast and Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Politics of Meaning/Meaning of Politics: Cultural Sociology of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 151.



the last 2,000, 2,500 years.”<sup>87</sup> Under the influence of such metaphors of spiritualized militancy, a fundamentalist believer can easily excuse poor behavior and sin within his own political tribe while simultaneously ascribing malevolent motives to his opposing tribe. Fundamentalists can then justify extreme and aggressive political behavior in the name of fighting a “zero-sum game of good versus evil.”<sup>88</sup> In this high-stakes political game of cosmic significance, there is simply no allowance for “incremental change, or for reasoning with those who differed with them, or for mediation, or for gradual reform.” Reasonable compromise – or even just a slower pace of change – becomes unacceptable. Fundamentalism will seek “drastic and immediate solutions to [political] problems” as long as it attributes spiritual categories of pure good and pure evil to preferred political tribes.<sup>89</sup>

Future research on this topic could further apply these findings on subthreshold emotions to evangelical politics and apocalyptic rhetoric. It can be tempting for evangelical leaders to react against the excesses of fundamentalist fear-driven rhetoric by failing to appeal to strong emotions at all. But biblical anthropology and political neuroscience shows that there may be ways to offer gospel-driven political rhetoric that does not stoke but rather alleviates deeply rooted human fears. Michael Wear writes: “A politics that promotes fear and anger is counter to what is best for the human spirit. We reject anger and fear, but we offer compassion and

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<sup>87</sup> J. Lester Feder, “This is How Steve Bannon Sees the Entire World,” BuzzFeed, November 16, 2016, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/lesterfeder/this-is-how-steve-bannon-sees-the-entire-world#.anozYjJ5>.

<sup>88</sup> Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, 6.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

understanding for those who are angry and afraid.”<sup>90</sup> Grace, not fear, is the most distinct and helpful resource that Christianity can offer to the public.

This practice of grace is not a strategy to achieve political success. Kind, patient, and other-focused political actors often find themselves on the receiving end of public scorn and judgement. For Christians, following Jesus is a worthwhile moral commitment despite any vitriolic responses or apparent failures.<sup>91</sup>

But graciousness is not political surrender or weakness either; rather, it is viable as political means and ends. Over a long period of time, the most persuasive and sustainable witness does not rally troops against a common enemy but instead finds common values between very different sorts of people. Name-calling may attract eyes for a time, but ultimately, it tears down instead of building up. Positive rhetoric, on the other hand, may not yield immediate results but can ultimately serve as its own best apologetic.

### **Conclusion**

Fear-driven rhetoric is one of the most potent and destructive components of modern politics. The tactic exaggerates meaning threats to conflate them with physical threats, stokes visions of tribal combat, and justifies both through metaphors of religious apocalypse. While these three characteristics are certainly not exhaustive, they do help outline ways that fear-driven political rhetoric plays on natural human reactions against external threats and negative emotional discourses.

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<sup>90</sup> Michael Wear, *The Spirit of Our Politics: Spiritual Formation and the Renovation of Public Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2024), 120.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

Conscious rational decisions do play a role in the formation of political beliefs, but subthreshold negative emotions supersede reason as the initial and strongest motivators of political behavior. These emotions are a divine gift: stories and narratives transmitted through the haunted air can shape men's imaginations in beautiful, true, and good ways. But this truth of human anthropology can also be weaponized by fear-driven political rhetoric. This kind of language can effectively motivate impassioned, loyal political action because it appeals to vivid emotions deep within the human soul and imagination. Modern politicians know this and thus weaponize negative emotions to meaningfully influence political temperaments, beliefs, imaginations, and reactions against outgroups and perceived external threats.

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