

Why Do We Often Fear the Wrong Things?

GRANT JEWELL RICH

The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things. By Barry Glassner. Basic Books, 1999. ISBN 0-465-01489-5. 276 pp. Hardcover, \$25.

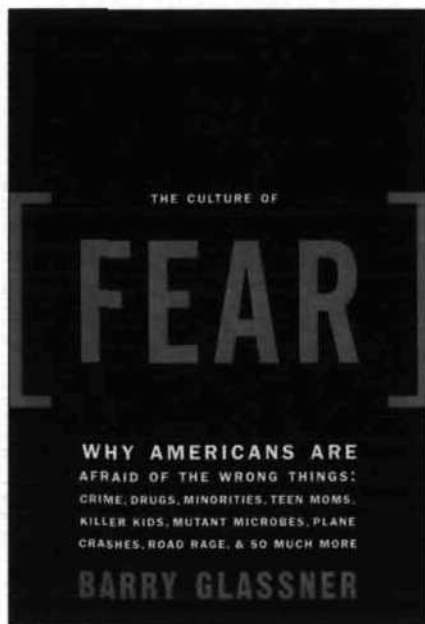
Each day Americans are bombarded by a barrage of media messages. At the supermarket checkout we can't help but read tabloid headlines that announce what appears to be the umpteenth teen mother tragedy. Each morning, talk shows seem to feature yet another victim of some rare disease. On the car radio we hear the details of what seems to be the latest in a string of ever more serious youth crimes. Television newscasts will spend weeks discussing the latest plane crash.

In his wonderfully written new book, Barry Glassner reminds us again and again that frequently our fears are grossly exaggerated given the actual frequency of these rare events.

Glassner, a sociology professor at the University of Southern California, uses persuasive logic and well-chosen statistics to demonstrate the infrequency of such events as "road rage" and the rarity of such criminals as "cyber-predators." Our almost pathological fears do serve some function, however. News media may use these fears to earn higher ratings, politicians may play on our fears during elections, and perhaps, in a sense, even lobbyists for special interest groups may exchange fear for increased fund-raising.

In a chapter detailing "dubious dangers on roadways," Glassner notes the

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discrepancy between the perception and reality of road rage. Popular media outlets tend to exaggerate the extent of road rage; for instance, an Oprah Winfrey show featuring road rage seemed to indicate that anyone at any time may be a likely victim. She warned, "We've all been there. It starts with the tap of the horn, and angry gesture . . . this is a show that affects so many people. . . ." A *Los Angeles Times* story exclaimed, "Road rage has become an exploding phenomenon across the country" and the Pacific Northwest was "plagued by a rise in road rage." Readers impressed by this hyperbole would have been surprised to read later in the story that only

five people were victims of road rage in the area in the past five years. Glassner also cites revealing statistics from a 1997 study by the American Automobile Association. The report noted that of the 250,000 people killed in auto-related deaths between 1990 and 1997, under one in one thousand could be directly attributed to "road rage." Americans clearly have other things more worthy of worry than road rage.

In a particularly powerful chapter, Glassner demolishes irrational fears about airplane safety. While the airline traveler may feel uncomfortable when turbulence is encountered, or when recalling that she is many thousands of feet over ground in a flying, metal tube with wings, fears of crashes, collisions, and death are greatly exaggerated. As Glassner notes, "In the entire history of commercial aviation . . . fewer than 13,000 people have died in airplane crashes. Three times that many Americans lose their lives in automobile accidents in a single year. The average person's probability of dying in an air crash is about 1 in 4 million, or roughly the same as winning the jackpot in a state lottery." One reason the general public may continue to fear flying is that journalists often confuse incidence for rates. In recent years, more flights fly, and there have been more accidents, but while the total number of flights has increased, the accident rate has declined. Reporting a

given year as "the deadliest in aviation" takes on new meaning when the claim is placed in the context of an increased overall number of flights, the vast majority of which land safely. Another improper skewing of reality occurred in a front-page 1994 *USA Today* story that warned to "steer clear of commuter planes with fewer than 30 seats." Fortunately the Federal Aviation Administration responded with information that when Alaskan bush flights, air taxis, and helicopters are removed from analysis, commuter flight accident rates are nearly identical to major carrier accident rates. Airplane crashes often make headline news while car crashes often do not, in part because airline crashes are relatively infrequent and tend to result in a greater number of simultaneous deaths than do auto crashes. What is newsworthy does not always make sense statistically.

Later in the book, Glassner turns to a discussion of youth violence. In the wake of the terrible school shooting tragedy in Littleton, Colorado, many policymakers are rushing to correct what has been viewed as an epidemic of youth violence. Are public fears of a new generation of monster youth unfounded? The media, at least, are fond of reporting youth violence stories. Footage relating to the horrible Littleton event has been played and replayed. One study Glassner cites found that 48 percent of all reports about children on the CBS, ABC, and NBC evening newscasts concerned crime and violence, while only 4 percent of the stories concerned children's health and economic issues. Are "killer kids" a growing threat to our cities, suburbs, and rural areas? Probably not. Glassner cites data from criminologist Vincent Schiraldi indicating that "youth homicide rates had declined by thirty percent in recent years, and more than three times as many people were killed by lightning than by violence at schools."

This is a beautifully written and thoughtfully argued book. In addition

to the rich explorations of youth crime, road rage, and airline safety, Glassner turns his talents to discussions of our overblown fears concerning such phenomena as teen pregnancy, racial stereotypes, pedophile priests, crack babies, rare illnesses, and cyberporn.



The Alien Abduction Puzzle: Solved!

Robert A. Baker

The Abduction Enigma: The Truth Behind the Mass Alien Abductions of the Late 20th Century. By Kevin D. Randle, Russ Estes, and William P. Cone. Tom Doherty Associates Inc. New York, NY. 1999. ISBN: 0-312-86708-5. 416 pages. Hardcover, \$25.95.

This book, along with the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER anthology *The UFO Invasion: Alien Abductions and Government Coverups* (Prometheus 1997), should convince even the most dedicated believer in aliens and alien abductions that he not only has been badly misinformed over the past five decades but also been sorely misled by the popular press, the abduction researchers, and even by the abductees themselves.

In their introduction Randle, Estes, and Cone mislead the reader into thinking they, too, believe in the reality of alien abductions by asserting that they are convinced ET visitations to Earth have taken place. The remainder of the book is a brilliant, step-by-step analysis of how this pernicious myth of people-snatching was given birth, then amplified and repeated and reinforced by folklorists, propagandists, media-mavens, and pseudo-therapists as well as hundreds of alleged victims. Eventually this monstrous modern myth was so well anchored in our cultural ethos that many people now take "alien abductions" as an established scientific fact.

In chapter after chapter the authors

His book offers a much-needed antidote to the pervasive media virus of misinformation Americans encounter on a daily basis. *The Culture of Fear* should find an audience not only with academic social scientists, but also with worrywarts of every variety.

systematically dismantle each argument the champions of alien abductions (AA) have made since the Betty and Barney Hill triggering incident in the 1950s. In Part I the alleged "interrupted journey," the Travis Walton escapade, and other early cases of claimed contact and bedroom encounters are examined in detail and found wanting. Part II, "The Common Threat," covers the manner and motives underlying the need many people have to create and support an alien folklore as well as the way in which pop culture invents and perpetuates such strange beliefs and delusions. Of particular salience is the authors' explanations for other social and psychological mechanisms that invigorate and sustain the "abduction scenarios."

Part III, one of the better sections of the book, is devoted to a scathing, and at times hilarious, analysis of the "abduction" researchers themselves and the madness of their methods. While most of the investigators are by no means as deranged and deluded as Marshall Herff Applewhite ("Bo") or Bonnie Lu Nettles ("Peep"), all fail to

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