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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Fearing Fear Itself

By PAUL KRUGMAN

In America's darkest hour, Franklin Delano Roosevelt urged the nation not to succumb to "nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror." But that was then.

Today, many of the men who hope to be the next president — including all of the candidates with a significant chance of receiving the Republican nomination — have made unreasoning, unjustified terror the centerpiece of their campaigns.

Consider, for a moment, the implications of the fact that Rudy Giuliani is taking foreign policy advice from Norman Podhoretz, who wants us to start bombing Iran "as soon as it is logistically possible."

Mr. Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary* and a founding neoconservative, tells us that Iran is the "main center of the Islamofascist ideology against which we have been fighting since 9/11." The Islamofascists, he tells us, are well on their way toward creating a world "shaped by their will and tailored to their wishes." Indeed, "Already, some observers are warning that by the end of the 21st century the whole of Europe will be transformed into a place to which they give the name Eurabia."

Do I have to point out that none of this makes a bit of sense?

For one thing, there isn't actually any such thing as Islamofascism — it's not an ideology; it's a figment of the neocon imagination. The term came into vogue only because it was a way for Iraq hawks to gloss over the awkward transition from pursuing Osama bin Laden, who attacked America, to Saddam Hussein, who didn't. And Iran had nothing whatsoever to do with 9/11 — in fact, the Iranian regime was quite helpful to the United States when it went after Al Qaeda and its Taliban allies in Afghanistan.

Beyond that, the claim that Iran is on the path to global domination is beyond ludicrous. Yes, the Iranian regime is a nasty piece of work in many ways, and it would be a bad thing if that regime acquired nuclear weapons. But let's have some perspective, please: we're talking about a country with roughly the G.D.P. of Connecticut, and a government whose military budget is roughly the same as Sweden's.

Meanwhile, the idea that bombing will bring the Iranian regime to its knees — and bombing is the only option, since we've run out of troops — is pure wishful thinking. Last year Israel tried to cripple Hezbollah with an air campaign, and ended up strengthening it instead. There's every reason to believe that an attack on Iran would produce the same result, with the added effects of endangering U.S. forces in Iraq and driving oil prices well into triple digits.

Mr. Podhoretz, in short, is engaging in what my relatives call crazy talk. Yet he is being treated with respect

by the front-runner for the G.O.P. nomination. And Mr. Podhoretz's rants are, if anything, saner than some of what we've been hearing from some of Mr. Giuliani's rivals.

Thus, in a recent campaign ad Mitt Romney asserted that America is in a struggle with people who aim "to unite the world under a single jihadist Caliphate. To do that they must collapse freedom-loving nations. Like us." He doesn't say exactly who these jihadists are, but presumably he's referring to Al Qaeda — an organization that has certainly demonstrated its willingness and ability to kill innocent people, but has no chance of collapsing the United States, let alone taking over the world.

And Mike Huckabee, whom reporters like to portray as a nice, reasonable guy, says that if Hillary Clinton is elected, "I'm not sure we'll have the courage and the will and the resolve to fight the greatest threat this country's ever faced in Islamofascism." Yep, a bunch of lightly armed terrorists and a fourth-rate military power — which aren't even allies — pose a greater danger than Hitler's panzers or the Soviet nuclear arsenal ever did.

All of this would be funny if it weren't so serious.

In the wake of 9/11, the Bush administration adopted fear-mongering as a political strategy. Instead of treating the attack as what it was — an atrocity committed by a fundamentally weak, though ruthless adversary — the administration portrayed America as a nation under threat from every direction.

Most Americans have now regained their balance. But the Republican base, which lapped up the administration's rhetoric about the axis of evil and the war on terror, remains infected by the fear the Bushies stirred up — perhaps because fear of terrorists maps so easily into the base's older fears, including fear of dark-skinned people in general.

And the base is looking for a candidate who shares this fear.

Just to be clear, Al Qaeda is a real threat, and so is the Iranian nuclear program. But neither of these threats frightens me as much as fear itself — the unreasoning fear that has taken over one of America's two great political parties.

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