



Barack Obama's Scary Science

By *Edward Tenner*

Great minds think alike; at least those of some *Washington Post* columnists do. Just three days after Michael Gerson [took President Obama to task](#) for "snobbery" and "pseudoscience" in remarks about the Democrats' flagging poll results, Charles Krauthammer [chimes in](#) to accusing Obama of disrespecting the "peasantry" with a newly invented "psychological derangement":

anxiety-induced Obama Underappreciation Syndrome, wherein an entire population is so addled by its economic anxieties as to be neurologically incapable of appreciating the 'facts and science' undergirding Obamacare and the other blessings their president has bestowed upon them from on high.

Let's look at the [offending remarks](#) Obama made at a recent fundraiser :

Part of the reason that our politics seems so tough right now and facts and science and argument does not seem to be winning the day all the time is because we're hardwired not to always think clearly when we're scared. And the country's scared.

Forget the merits and demerits of Obama policies. Every part of this statement is verifiable. Politics *are* tough. Many people *are* frightened. Fact, science, and argument *don't* always carry the day. Serious Republicans acknowledge this when they blame Democrats for bad science and excessive apprehension. And they can also recall the infamous anti-Goldwater [daisy commercial](#) in the 1964 campaign, and the hundreds of psychiatrists willing to declare the candidate unfit for office without having examined or even met him. (It led to a revision of the profession's [code of ethics](#).) In this campaign, I've seen commercials in which both parties have exploited fear.

And fear *does* impair decision making. Even the libertarian Cato Institute's blog, gently correcting Krauthammer while agreeing with this main point, [acknowledges this proposition](#). In fact, economic conservatives criticize the "precautionary principle" of avoiding all potential harm as based on an irrational degree of fear, for example of genetically modified plants and animals. As political rhetoric, Obama's statement may be pathetic when set beside Franklin Roosevelt's [first inaugural](#) ("fear itself -- nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance"). But it's no insult to his rational critics.

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