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WILLIAMS: The political (ab)use of fear

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Fear is sometimes good for you. It can help you anticipate and avoid danger, and remain safe. It functions the same way pain does - its purpose is your survival. E.O. Wilson says that one of the clues to our common African origin is our instinctive fear of snakes. One's first reaction when encountering a snake, no matter how harmless it might actually be, is alarm.

It's no surprise then that man, [Aristotle's](#) political animal, should bring his survival instincts to politics. We often allow fear to control our political decisions, rather than rationally dissecting the issues, and some very smart politicians have discovered that it is quite easy to take advantage of fear.

For example, a member of [Congress](#) once declared that the Republican plan for health-care reform is for sick people to die quickly. Obviously this was a gross distortion but it works for gullible people - and fear makes you gullible, makes you willing to give up your will in exchange for safety. It is one of the reasons that the founders of America were so insistent that the citizenry be well educated and sophisticated.

[Penn Jillette](#) of the Cato Institute once said that the Democrats are the [Party of Hatred and the Republicans](#) are the [Party of Fear](#). It's a generalization, of course, and one can't expect it to always hold true. And, one must add, that fear and hatred are closely allied; fear is very often what is at the core of hatred, the most obvious example of this being racism.

The Democrats are using fear more than hatred since the House passed, almost entirely along party lines, the budget proposed by [Rep. Paul Ryan, Wisconsin Republican and Budget Committee](#) chairman. Many people do not need to be persuaded of the details - fear is enough for them to take the Democrats' side. [Mr. Ryan](#) is "changing [Medicare](#) as we know it," they say, and "change" of any kind is suddenly an automatic disqualifier.

Why are these rank-and-file Democrats afraid of the Ryan budget, and not afraid of the president's budget, which, by the way, was shot down without receiving a single vote even from Democrats? President Obama has yet to offer a budget that balances. When we look at

any of his budgets, they promise permanent deficit spending. The Republican messaging problem is that no one is afraid of that.

We've been spending so wildly for so long that we do not even notice the deleterious effects of it. People often ask me, "what's the big deal" about the deficit? What's going to happen, they ask, about the national debt? Many people do not think that we will ever pay back the debt: under Mr. Obama's budget, they would be right. We wouldn't pay back a dime - it's just free money.

But everyone who has actually run a business and made payroll knows that money always has to come from somewhere. If you simply print more of it, its value goes down - you've accomplished nothing.

Why are people not afraid of this crushing inflation? How can we take this for granted? People often remark and joke about how cheap a loaf of bread used to be, but never realize how harmful it is that the dollar has been so weakened.

Fear is sometimes appropriate, and this is one of those times. We should fear skyrocketing debt and its consequent inflation; we should fear the disintegration of the family in our society; we should fear cuts to our already overextended military.

What shouldn't we fear? The Ryan budget, for one thing, which doesn't even balance this decade. This is hardly a radical proposal - it's only radical compared to our far left president.

To my Democrat friends, who believe so strongly in the virtue of big government, I say this: perhaps spending cuts could actually make the government work better. Maybe if a government agency couldn't simply borrow and borrow indefinitely, it would be forced into efficiency. We can certainly agree that infinite spending does not encourage efficiency; why be so afraid of cutting the deficit, of approaching a balanced checkbook?