

Anger is No Substitute for Thinking.
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One of the most difficult things about popular democracy is that it requires thought. Not all voters, unfortunately, are capable of it. Throughout the history of our republic, chaotic events have often brought out the worst in us. Whipping Quakers for condemning slavery, witch burnings, the whiskey tax rebellion, lynchings, religious bigotry of all sorts, hatred of immigrants, and communist scares, have darkened our otherwise optimistic history.

We never took time at our beginnings to address the issue of slavery, which many people knew was wrong. Instead, we constructed a compromise with the slave-owning states to count each slave as 3/5 of a person, slaves who could never be voting citizens, but were useful for congressional apportionment. Intelligent citizens knew this was wrong (including President John Adams and his son, John Quincy Adams); but for too many people, slavery was an economic issue. Money trumped justice. Despite this, our slave-owning first president, George Washington, freed his slaves upon his death. This would be equivalent today to a millionaire giving all his money to philanthropy rather than to his children.

Our country was built on immigrant labor. The Irish and Chinese, both of whom arrived dirt poor and scorned, built our transnational railroads. When that labor was completed, the Chinese were hunted down and murdered in such numbers that Congress passed a law excluding any further Chinese immigrants to this country.

World War I brought hatred of Germans never experienced before in this country. Politicians played into it. After the war ended and the Soviet Union was born, politicians again picked up an irrational fear and anger, setting off a "red scare" that looked for communists under every bed.

The doors to immigration were slammed shut in the 1920s, not because of popular anger over loss of jobs (there were plenty of jobs), but because intellectuals came up with a "scientific theory" called Eugenics. Under this theory, supporters claimed it was the greater good to prevent "inferior" people from immigrating and reproducing.

The country's most distinguished Supreme Court Justice, Oliver Wendell Holmes, was a believer in this notion, as was Woodrow Wilson. (Intellectuals can also be stupid.) He approved the sterilization of a young woman deemed "an imbecile" (she was not; just poor, uneducated, and impregnated by her employer). The Eugenics movement also identified as "mentally defective" immigrants to keep out: Jews and Chinese! Nobel Prizes today put that to a lie.

The Great Depression gave rise to a national fit of anger. Capitalism appeared flawed and there were many angry citizens ready to listen to anybody who could reflect back to them their fears. Black lynchings in the South rose to horrifying numbers, reflecting the panic of poor and ignorant Whites, looking for someone to blame for their misery. Purveyors of hatred against Jews sold their poison from pulpits and on the radio (Father Coughlin and Henry Ford).

When bad things happen (natural catastrophes or military ones), people look for someone to blame. When President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in a radio broadcast said: "We have nothing to fear but fear itself," frightened people took heart. However, Bad leaders, such as Hitler, turned fear to their own purposes. Demagogues use an election (one man, one vote, one time), to destroy democracy. The Arab Spring and the one-time-only election in Gaza have damaged the region more than their Israeli enemy. Their anger is misdirected; it is their own culture at fault.

Today, anger rather than thought is aimed at the wrong "usual suspects." The real issues are more complicated: computers and robotics reducing the need for labor; overpopulation and climate change (most evident in Africa and Egypt), creating food shortages; and the consequences of misgovernment driving millions of people from their homes and into Europe, with dire consequences.

Political anger is turned on "government," an amorphous enemy, without whom there is only fascism or anarchy. Demagogues blame all ills on immigrants, on the press (kill the messenger), and on the other party as "the enemy," not "the partner." Today's ugly primary election audiences are full of passionate anger and hatred, but very little thought.

682 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of God's Law or Man's Law. You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net.