

# Politics of fear: Not just Rumsfeld's strategy

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [November 27, 2007](#) issue

At a dark moment in American history, Franklin Roosevelt said to the American people: “Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”

Compare these words from Roosevelt’s 1933 inaugural speech, spoken when the nation was in the midst of a frightening economic depression, to comments from Donald Rumsfeld, who as secretary of defense in 2006 instructed his staff on how to respond to a demand for his resignation: “Talk about Somalia, the Philippines, etc. Make the American people realize they are surrounded in the world by violent extremists.”

Roosevelt inspired a nation to embrace the future with hope; Rumsfeld promoted a strategy of fear. The details of this memo, one of many Rumsfeld missives to his staff that were obtained by the *Washington Post*, were reported by staff writer Robin Wright (November 1).

The Rumsfeld memos also reveal a narrow and derogatory attitude toward Muslims. He wrote that Muslims had allowed oil wealth to detach them “from the reality of work, effort and investment that leads to wealth for the rest of the world”; moreover, “Muslims are against physical labor, so they bring in Koreans and Pakistanis while their young people remain unemployed”—and “an unemployed population is easy to recruit to radicalism.”

The memos suggest ignorance as well as prejudice—only a small segment of the world’s Muslim population has benefited from oil wealth. His memos are consistent with the Bush administration strategy, implemented after September 11, 2001, which promotes a climate of fear as a way to fight Islamic-inspired “terrorism.”

This climate of fear permeates our political culture and, according to *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman, is being perpetuated by our leaders: “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” (October 29).

Krugman suggests that we consider “the implications of the fact that [Republican front-runner] Rudy Giuliani is taking foreign policy advice from Norman Podhoretz, who wants us to start bombing Iran ‘as soon as it is logistically possible.’”

Krugman quotes Podhoretz, former editor of *Commentary* magazine and a “founding neoconservative,” as saying that Iran is the “main center of the Islamofascist ideology against which we have been fighting since 9/11,” and that “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.”

But Krugman points out that Islamofascism is not an ideology and calls it “a figment of the neocon imagination.” Any claim that Iran will succeed in global domination, he says, is ludicrous.

Krugman is not advocating complacency—he says we need to be realistic about the dangers of the world. “Al Qaeda is a real threat, and so is the Iranian nuclear program. But neither of these threats frightens me as much as . . . the unreasoning fear that has taken over one of America’s two great political parties.”

Although Democratic candidates have not embraced the fearmongering of their Republican opponents, front-runner Hillary Clinton has adopted a middle-ground strategy to carry her into her presumed general election campaign. That strategy could account for her vote in favor of the Kyl-Lieberman Senate amendment, which designated the Iranian Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organization.

Clinton was criticized for that vote by Senator Joe Biden: “The idea of giving the president an excuse to be able to go to war with Iran I found absolutely mindless.”

With this vote, Clinton is ignoring the public’s increasing eagerness to be done with Iraq. Tom Engelhardt, a fellow of the Nation Institute, says that in spite of a public disenchantment with the Iraqi venture, “the Washington consensus—Democrats as well as Republicans, in Congress as in the Oval Office—has been settling ever deeper into the Iraqi imperial project” (tomdispatch.com).

That project is evident in the \$600 million U.S. embassy compound scheduled for Baghdad. In the November issue of *Vanity Fair*, William Langewiesche reports that the compound will include 613 blast-resistant apartments surrounded by nine-foot perimeter walls.

None of the leading presidential candidates seems willing to act on Roosevelt's challenge "to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly." If any of them aimed to meet that challenge, they would have to admit that the Baghdad embassy compound is being built not to house diplomats and provide a small military training presence, but to be a permanent Middle East headquarters for U.S. imperialism—and a monument to the politics of fear.