

Jimmy Anderson: Fear thy neighbor: How conservatism is turning us against each other

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If I told you to imagine a city rife with violence, one with armed carjackings on every corner, fires raging in storefronts, bodies strewn by the roadside, you would think I was describing a war-torn city in Ukraine. But no – this is how Republicans describe American cities like Madison and Milwaukee. While this sounds ridiculous and hyperbolic, you only need to watch primetime Fox News to hear descriptions like these and worse.

Take the now thankfully fired Tucker Carlson. [In a single 20-minute segment](#), Carlson compared Chicago to Mogadishu, said that “armed gangs are operating with impunity,” claimed that Democratic politicians “legalized murder, looting and trespassing,” and asserted, “this is what the collapse of civilization looks like.” This kind of over-the-top commentary – often accompanied by footage of young Black men – is pounded into the fear centers of Fox News viewers every hour of every day.

All of this incendiary rhetoric filters down to Republican politicians, who are often consumers of conservative media themselves. During a recent meeting of the Wisconsin Assembly, Representative Rozar said people should be terrified of being thrown out of their car if they visit downtown Milwaukee. Representative Snyder, a former conservative media figure himself, claimed that urban protests would spread “like a brush fire... and the next thing you know, there’s chaos everywhere.”

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Conservatives from the echo chambers of right-wing media to the Wisconsin Assembly floor exploit their viewers' deepest fears and ugliest prejudices to create an alternate universe where metro areas serve as horror-scapes of unrest, criminals lurk around every corner, and violence upon you and your loved ones is not a possibility but an inevitability. [Or as Fox News puts it](#), we live in a society where you must "have a plan to kill everyone you meet." In turn, this fearmongering builds a culture of extreme paranoia where entrenched distrust turns us against one another and makes instances of reactionary violence sickly commonplace.

America has recently witnessed a string of violent shootings where in each case, the perpetrator reacted with impulsive violence. In Texas, after a high school cheerleading practice, a young woman accidentally climbed into what she thought was her friend's car. After seeing a stranger in the driver seat, she quickly got out and found the right vehicle. They were about to drive away when the man from the car approached them. When she rolled down her window to apologize for her mistake, the man suddenly fired multiple gunshots at the girls, causing severe injuries to both [Payton Washington and Heather Roth](#).

In upstate New York, a 20-year-old woman was looking for a friend's house and accidentally drove into the wrong driveway. The homeowner immediately opened fire, senselessly killing [Kaylin Gillis](#). On the same day in South Florida, in a disturbingly similar situation, two teenagers were trying to drop off a grocery delivery but mixed up the address and entered the wrong driveway. The property owner reacted by shooting at [Waldes Thomas Jr. and Diamond Harley](#) as they desperately attempted to drive away.

In Kansas City, a young boy was sent to pick up his brothers from a friend's house and he mistakenly rang the doorbell of the wrong home. The man who answered shot 16-year-old [Ralph Yarl](#) in the head and again in the arm as he fell, causing critical injuries.

This deadly violence is obviously exacerbated by the explicit mission of the conservative movement to arm every American. Conservative media makes it seem like the only solution to supposedly rampant criminality is to always keep a weapon by your side, while at the same time conservative politicians loosen or eliminate gun safety laws, often allowing dangerous and irresponsible people to carry concealed weapons with little to no training. As we have seen, this noxious cocktail of escalating fear and armament inevitably leads to scared, paranoid gunowners, who see the people in their communities not as neighbors but as potential threats.

And as we have seen, these gunowners ironically end up committing the very acts of criminal violence they have been programmed to fear.

I do want to make it clear that crime is a legitimate concern for large cities and small towns alike, whether they are run by Republicans or Democrats. What doesn't help is cynically drumming up fear about the potential dangers of crime until people are so terrified that they offer innocent strangers a bullet to the head rather than a helping hand.

When it comes to issues like crime, because it can elicit strong emotions, the media and lawmakers have an even greater responsibility to be careful with their words. Especially with so many Americans armed with weapons that can end lives in a split second, incendiary language can be the tipping point between life and death, thus making the line between a "good guy with a gun" and a reactionary murderer much thinner than anyone should be comfortable with.

Ultimately, I have little control over what conservative media and politicians do - and little doubt that they will continue to plumb the ugliest parts of our psyches for political gain. What I can do is ask you to see the manipulation for what it is. They want you angry and afraid. They want you to succumb to that anger and fear, to live in your community certain that at any moment, someone dangerous is about to pull into your driveway or knock on your door. But if you believe such a thing, you will inevitably become a more violent person yourself. The simple truth is that as long as you fear your neighbors, you can never be at peace yourself.

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