Excerpts from *False Alarm: The Truth About the Epidemic of Fear*, by Marc Siegel, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2005

**Introduction**

p. 1 Fear is looming larger in our lives. Yet no one has tried to integrate what scientists have learned about the physiology of fear with the increased reliance on fear on the part of both the media and the politicians. Of course some fears have their origin in real events, most prominently the attacks of September 11, 2001, but the overall climate of fear is inflated well out of proportion to the reality and is its own core danger to society.

**Part I - Fight or Flight**

**Why Are We So Afraid?**

p. 14 Fear is more than a state of mind; it's a chemical. It is present in the circuitry of our brains, in the neurochemical exchanges between nerves. Fear is a physical reaction to a perceived threat. As long as the danger is direct and real, fear is normal and helps to protect us. p. 15 Over the past century, armed with scientific and technological breakthroughs, we Americans have dramatically reduced our risk in virtually every area of life, resulting in life spans 60 percent longer in 2000 than in 1900. p. 16 And yet, we worry more than ever before. The natural dangers are no longer there, but the response mechanisms are still in place, and now they are turned on much of the time. We implode, turning our adaptive fear mechanism into a maladaptive panicked response.

**It Works for Animals but Not for Us**

p. 25 Fear is user-ready at birth. As we grow, we are conditioned to respond to certain triggers. The fear response becomes automatic, though the dangers may not always be visible. p. 26 The dangers that provoke the fear response in humans can be real or imagined, concrete or abstract. We may witness them firsthand or hear about them from others. We have a far greater capacity to imagine dangers than a rat does, and the potential for misperception is one of the major concerns of this book.

**Our Culture of Worry**

p. 36 Animals may fear death as much as we do, but whereas animals freeze in the face of immediate danger, we experience an ongoing existential fear, connected to our unique self-awareness. Our central fear of death reaches beyond our animal instincts and may threaten to overwhelm us. But like all our fears, our fear of death is overblown when we are wrongly convinced that death is in the offing. Our fear of death is so pervasive it is too easily provoked.

**Playing Politics with Fear**

p. 50 Politicians on all sides are broadcasting their danger/safety messages via the media's hype apparatus. p. 52 To continue selling the war, the Bush administration, like both Democrats and Republicans before it, kept generating fear…. The ultimate argument was put forth by Harvard professor Michael Ignatieff in his book *The Lesser Evil*. Unless we extinguish these terrorists now, the argument went, they could mushroom into nuclear-weapon-wielding menaces who could blow up our cities. Isn’t it a small price to give up some liberties now rather than face an ineradicable danger later on? The answer to this is no, if one believes that we can’t allow fear to control us. Despite terrorism, the risk to the individual remains quite low.

p. 53 While drawing our attention to these unlikely dangers, at the same time the government revealed a porous safety net, which automatically spread more fear. As Robert Reich wrote in the *American Prospect* in August 2004, “America’s intelligence system failed to see terrorist threats coming from al-Qaeda prior to September 11 that should have been evident, and then, after 9/11, saw terrorist threats coming from Iraq that didn’t exist. A system that doesn’t warn of real threats and does warn of unreal ones is broken.”

**Disasters: Real or Imagined**

p. 70 [T]he 2003 blackout in the Northeast was met with relative calm. Why? One answer was the absence of the usual media hype, an important catalyst of panic. Another answer was that when we were compelled to forgo electricity, many of us learned we didn’t really need it. And this was why we weren’t
really afraid. The secret to the calm of the blackout was that we found the time to talk to each other and reassure each other the way we did before the grid took over.

p. 73 In serving as an authoritative source of information, while at the same time magnifying risk, the mainstream media – especially television – prey on our vulnerabilities and uncertainties, provoking us to be afraid. This is not to say that the media can't play a positive role in a true disaster…. The recent tsunami in Asia was historic in terms of the extensive media coverage of the rescue effort, but it was also magnified to the point where people in California and elsewhere expected the next set of monster waves to mount their shores at any moment.

Finding Things to Worry About
p. 81 We can't trust our risk experts because their facts are amplified by the government, the media, and public advocates, each depending on different agendas. But this doesn't mean we can automatically trust our intuition either…. Any resolution of this dichotomy between misinforming experts and misguided intuition must involve retraining in how to recognize danger.

Profiting from Fear
p. 89 In America, we pay outlandish prices for cosmetic surgeries and for our medications. In fact, we are willing to pay any price if it helps keep us insulated from the inevitability of death. Manufacturers manipulate us by playing to this notion of keeping us beyond harm. Medications that work perfectly well are stamped into disuse by the magic-elixir claims of the new drugs. These preparations are more expensive but often not worth the additional cost.

Part II – Bugs du Jour
Anthrax
p. 108 The anthrax scare established a precedent, a pattern by which we would convert our unease into a specific threat. Each new public health risk from this point forward would reach the news media and initiate an overreaction on a nationwide basis.

p. 111 When the first anthrax-laden envelopes were received in October 2001, the FBI froze the Centers for Disease Control out of the high-profile investigation, according to CDC officials. That meant that half the country’s experts on bioattacks (the army employs the other half), and the only scientists with a special interest in public health were kept out of the loop. Then, to make matters worse, the CDC spread information it had received secondhand. All this resulted in a fumbled response that put some postal and media workers at serious risk and scared the public.

p. 115 After underestimating the anthrax risk to mail carriers and a few members of the media and public, the CDC never again wanted to be seen as underreacting. Instead, the CDC consistently overreacted and scared us unnecessarily.

Insects, Pox, and Lethal Gas
p. 126 There were cases of West Nile virus in 1999, 2000, and 2001, but it wasn’t until after anthrax drew our attention to bacteria and viruses in 2002 that we began to worry about West Nile virus. The number of cases was on the rise, but hardly enough to justify the sudden hysteria.

p. 130 With smallpox, the greatest problem in the fall and winter of 2002 was an exaggerated sense of risk on all sides… Here was a disease that was being hyped even though it hadn’t made anyone sick in the United States in over fifty years. Yet the public had to contend with two opposing fears: fear of smallpox and fear of the vaccine.

p. 137 The threat we face from chemical terrorist attacks has been greatly exaggerated. Nerve gas is very difficult to produce and distribute; moreover, it dissipates rapidly…. VX gas stays around longer and can stick to the skin, enter the pores, and block the nerves – but it would be just about impossible for clouds of VX gas to blow through the streets. A delivery system that could expose a massive number of citizens to nerve gas without the gas being destroyed by heat or dissipated by wind simply doesn’t exist. Duct tape and plastic sheets? To protect us from what? How is a terrorist going to bring VX gas to my door?
SARS
p. 142 In April 2003 up rose SARS [Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome] to grab the media megaphone…. But no one died of SARS in the United States in 2003, and people eventually grew tired of hearing about it. The CDC and the World Health Organization had restricted travel to and from Asia and Toronto based on the assumption that air travel could allow an emerging contagion to spread more easily. This theory was neither proven nor disproven. In fact, historically, isolating an afflicted patient has always been much more effective than quarantining a region…. p. 145 This helped to spread worldwide economic havoc – many estimates were that SARS cost over $30 billion to local economies worldwide. p. 147 In reality, SARS was a garden-variety respiratory cold virus, nothing sexy, nothing sinister. It was unsettling to consider that all this attention paid to SARS took attention away from influenza and other proven killers. Worldwide, malaria, dengue, and AIDS were diseases that infected millions each year and for which the protections in place were woefully inadequate.

Flu
p. 157 Before 2003, flu was underappreciated. It was a widely held, yet poorly acted upon, public health perception that we needed more vaccinations, more isolation of those who were sick, and more hand washing. When I first saw flu hit the headlines, I hoped that the sudden attention would shed light on these basic precautions. Unfortunately, the flu scare of 2003 did not necessarily lead to proper prevention, but as with all bugs du jour, it involved significant expense.

Cows, Birds, and Humans
p. 164 [T]he risk of acquiring mad cow disease from the meat we eat has always been very low because of a built-in protection that the news media has failed to emphasize. The direct transmission from animal to human involves crossing an effective species barrier. [Though millions of humans ate beef] during the worst ten-year period… only 140 people have actually been infected with the variant CJD so far… But the media focus on the mystery and deadliness of the disease made it seem like a lot more deaths.

p. 173 It is true that an avian flu, if it morphs into a human-to-human virus, can cause another worldwide epidemic like the one in 1918. But many viruses and bacteria have the potential to harm, and it is up to public health agencies to distinguish between potential and actual. Disease information is contextual – it is never an all-or-nothing situation as portrayed in the news.

p. 175 The whole flu-shot fiasco [in 2004] was an example of inadequate preparation coupled with overinflated expectation and a fear of going without. One of the main reasons that a shortage like this could occur is that drug manufacturers are not anxious to produce vaccines in the first place…. p. 176 Drug companies are not eager to make a product they can’t make a lot of money on. The only workable solution to prevent the panic of a sudden shortage is for the government to step in and support and subsidize the manufacture of this vaccine. The plan of buying back unused vaccines isn’t sufficient. It is far more important to ensure production of an adequate number of vaccines in the first place. Instead, Congress only approved half of the $100 million requested in 2003 to develop better flu vaccines and improve the distribution system.

Part III – Healing Fear
The Fear Prophets
p. 193 Religion works best when it engages the unanswerable questions, where faith is paramount in coping with the uncertainty of death. But religion has become overloaded with today’s obsessive worry and no longer serves as a reliable cure for fear.

Is There a Cure for Fear?
p. 205 Mostly, we are becoming a society of hypochondriacs, not just for medical reasons, but because of preoccupations in all aspects of our lives. We build elaborate safety nets for the wrong things, and then we panic when these nets are found to be ineffective. Healing this rampant fear means all of us becoming our own filters for information, not simply parroting what we hear on TV…. Once purged, once healed of our programmed fears, and with the help of knowledgeable go-to people who really care about us, we can reappraise the safety of our lives.