

Fear: The History of a Political Idea

reviewed by [James Corbett](#) in the [January 10, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Fear: The History of a Political Idea

Corey Robin

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In the wake of a presidential election marked by the explicit use of fear to gain votes, Corey Robin argues that a web of political institutions, elites and private

associations derive a sense of purpose and confidence from global evil and the fear it provokes. He claims that political fear has undermined America's commitment to freedom and equality, and he seeks a return to unvarnished egalitarian and libertarian principles. Robin's book is at once a call for Americans to reject fear as a moral or political foundation and a sobering assessment of the shortcomings of American society.

In a detailed historical analysis of the thought of Hobbes, Montesquieu, Tocqueville and Arendt, Robin illustrates how political fear enables one group to rule another and stops the ruled from pursuing happiness through political action. He parallels his historical analysis with an examination of "Fear, American Style," arguing that political fear in the United States is facilitated by federalism. Though federalism was intended to temper collusive, repressive federal government policies, it instead has created an environment in which the separate branches of the government have unchecked power and act in an unrestrained and repressive manner. State and local governments exacerbate this phenomenon by mimicking the legislation of the federal government with their own brand of federalism, making political fear a dense, pervasive and socially repressive enterprise.

Unlike federal and local governments, which are definable, cohesive units and subject to scrutiny and the rule of law, civil society, particularly the state and local elite, is more amorphous, and it adroitly utilizes federalism and the need for protection from federal intrusion as a shield from oversight. Working through pluralist, autonomous institutions such as schools, churches, families, civic groups and the workplace, elites exert a potent coercion on individual behavior, using everyday bonds and alliances to amplify fear. Fearful of stigmatization, ostracization, firing or the loss of a promotion, people stop talking about certain issues, and eventually stop thinking about them as well. This has particularly been true in the United States during periods of war. Robin illustrates how the current war on terrorism seeks to equate domestic dissent with terrorism.

Robin argues that in the United States fear is most visible and pervasive in the workplace. He details how those who are deemed unsupportive of the U.S. war on terrorism are subjected to blacklisting, firing and denial of promotion. Robin deftly compares the use of fear and coercion in support of the war on communism with its current use in the battle against terrorism. While he spends too much time on the former and not enough on the latter, his argument is convincing: the government sets a repressive tone, and then hovers in the background, allowing social

institutions and organizations that are not explicitly part of the government to create a palpable and concentrated climate of repression.

Americans' embrace of the Protestant work ethic and their propensity to define their identities through their careers create an environment in which the workplace is a prime locus of social control, Robin contends, and Americans' proclivity to imagine themselves as "defenders of universal decencies" allows workplace abuses to continue. Furthermore, as Americans seek to define themselves in opposition to repressive rule and the fear that it entails, they become adept at overlooking abuses within the United States, particularly if the abuses are conducted as part of attempts to make us safer.

The desire to focus on tragic events around the world is a point of convergence for political adversaries. Contemporary liberals see opportunities to accomplish abroad what they fail to accomplish at home. Conservatives see opportunities to once again define the United States as a nation that stands against an overarching opposing evil—as it did in the cold war.

Though Robin does not endorse a withdrawal from humanitarian concerns, his text makes us question the hidden assumptions and unstated objectives of U.S. foreign policy. Does the belief that America is a bastion of freedom allow us to ignore injustice in the United States while supporting a foreign policy that has the stated objective of spreading justice and liberty around the world? Similarly, does the Christian missionary response to crisis and conflict prevent us from questioning the disparity and injustice inherent to American society?

Robin's text does not attempt to answer these questions, but by helping us to rethink some of our most deeply held assumptions as Americans, perhaps it can make us less vulnerable to political fear.