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Book Review: The Culture of Fear

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Barry Glassner's *The Culture of Fear* appeared in bookstores at an opportune moment. The study is sub-titled "why Americans are afraid of the wrong things: crime, drugs, minorities, teen moms, killer kids, mutant microbes, plane crashes, road rage, & so much more." Glassner examines each of these topics and more to document that all too often as a nation, we respond to a problem with "panic driven public spending" which "we fritter away on our compulsions" leaving fewer resources "available for our real needs." In no small measure Glassner documents Shakespeare's words that "our fears do make us traitors."

I say opportune because *The Culture of Fear* was published just before last May's Columbine High School shootings, but that unfortunate event, linked as it was with school shootings in other states, has shaped the nation's political response to making schools safe places to learn. Students returning to some schools this fall found themselves having to sign in and out; in others underwent searches of their clothes and possessions (even ordered in some schools to bring only transparent plastic book bags and backpacks); in still others found themselves under camera surveillance or required to pass through metal detectors; and in yet others had to endure police details patrolling school corridors. Early in September PBS's *Morning Edition* broadcast the reaction of students in Atlanta, Maine, and Berkeley to these intrusions into their school day. The young woman from Atlanta complained that as a consequence of the required search procedures, entering the school building "took hours." The Berkeley student described how, in the weeks prior to school's opening, her school had been "crawling with police" training to respond to a potential Columbine and going so far as to simulate removing bodies from the building. The Maine student reported that Maine State Police had had to admit that Maine schools were "pretty safe"; his school, nevertheless, had prohibited hats and long coats, a ban which may prevent students from bringing concealed weapons to school but which at some point during the Maine autumn will greatly increase the risk of hypothermia. Each of the students quoted showed greater perception and clear-headedness than did those police officials and school administrators who formulated the safety policies. The students from Maine and Atlanta observed, albeit in different contexts, that most students confronted far greater risks in the school parking lots where school officials exercised virtually no supervision. The Berkeley student pointed to how the policies placed increased stress on students, most of whom would rather see the resources allocated to additional counselors and teachers than to increased police and surveillance presence.

Regardless, news feature after news feature throughout the summer and into the new school year has detailed the repressive measures school officials have imposed in many districts to guarantee school safety. The efforts have resulted in making schools very much like prisons, the difference being that unlike prisoners whose rights are removed in the interest of public safety, students' rights are removed in the interest of their own safety. Add to these policies those that are designed to make schools improved places to learn—dress codes, curfews, and similar regimentations—and the consequences to students' attitudes toward learning aren't all that difficult to figure out. Prisoners, most of them, don't learn much in prison that benefits society. To foster a pervasive feeling among young people that without constant surveillance they risk becoming victims or victimizers hardly seems the way to develop the social, political, or intellectual values American society requires. Rather, young people who suffer such governmental disregard of their rights as is now occurring may become filled with the resentment and anger toward the government that provokes the very disturbances the policies have been designed to prevent.

Our national legislature responded to the Columbine shootings by ignoring the real issue—gun control—and promoting a wholly useless—and wholly cynical—solution: place the Ten Commandments in every public school. They followed this spineless act by recessing to allow installation of bulletproof chair backs to ensure safety in their legislative chambers. Preventing public school students from worshiping false idols is no doubt a worthy aim, perhaps too worthy to reside in the hands of most politicians.
Regrettably, I rant rather than review. Glassner documents that schools are still the safest places to send children and that most accidents at school take the form of sports injuries. But, he says, "municipalities do not raise taxes ... to buy state-of-the-art safety equipment for student athletes. They raise them to buy more surveillance cameras and metal detectors, and to station more police officers in schools." Glassner concludes his chapter on "Youth at Risk" with the comment that "throughout the 1980's and 1990's Americans welcomed every permissible excuse to avoid facing up to our collective lack of responsibility toward our nation's children."

Glassner tries to provide reasons for why we avoid our social and political responsibilities; we prefer all too frequently, he writes, to heed the cries of alarmists about crime waves, crack babies, and killer viruses rather than to take account of more reasoned and moderate voices who, with the support of scientific and factual studies, demonstrate that crime has diminished, crack babies show no long term effects from their mothers' addiction, and killer viruses only rarely afflict the general population. He suggests as an underlying reason for our hysteria that "pre-millennial tensions ... provoke mass anxiety and ill reasoning.... So momentous does the calendric change seem," Glassner writes, "the populace cannot keep its wits about it." When I first read The Culture of Fear early in June, I considered this rationale pretty thin, even knowing as I did of the religious hysteria that swept across parts of Europe as the year 1000 approached. Many believed the millennium would bring either a catastrophic apocalypse or the second coming of Christ. But then, as the summer newscasts reported story after story about the "Y2K crisis," I began to reconsider. The fear that, as the ball dropped in Times Square, power plants might shut down, air traffic control might cease functioning, and America's nuclear missile arsenal might suddenly blast off and detonate pervaded newscasts even when those same newscasts interviewed experts who pooh-poohed the likelihood that any such events would or could occur. The god is in the machine, or so seemed the attitude, and it waits to spring Armageddon on us.

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Glassner's second explanation for what underlies the culture of fear strikes closer to lived experience, namely that TV news broadcasts and their "if it bleeds, it leads" ethos produces disproportionate coverage of crime, drugs, diseases, and the other social pathologies. This failure of proportion extends even to the weather reports where reporters are stationed on expressway overpasses or storm-washed beaches to inform us up close and personal how devastatingly Nature is about to disrupt our lives. Hurricane Floyd offers a textbook case. There, Friday morning after the storm, was a channel 4 reporter on Scituate beach telling her videocam operator to show the viewers "how angry the ocean was" and treating the audience to pictures of two foot seas scarcely threatening to any local resident who might have seen the real power of the North Atlantic. This ongoing diet of the horrific and catastrophic, as Glassner observes, "routinely let[s] emotional accounts trump objective information." More often than I think we'd like to admit, this emotionalism leads to dire consequences. The scare a few years ago over silicon breast implants cost Dow Corning millions in legal penalties and brought renewed pain to large numbers of women, many of them recovering from breast cancer. It was, as Glassner says, "one of the greatest triumphs of anecdotes over science" which led the FDA to ban implants on the basis of emotional talk show accounts and congressional hearings rather than on the foundation of scientific evidence provided by the AMA which opposed the ban. Subsequent reports in the months that followed showed how ungrounded the fears had been. Today, as I write, the West Nile Disease stands ready to serve as the epidemic of the month. Newsweek has perceived its fear monger potential; the networks, absorbed at the moment with the exhumation of Dr. Sam Shepherd's remains, won't lag far behind.

The Culture of Fear provides a helpful antidote to such hysteria. I suspect the study won't receive the large audience it deserves. Though his examples are distressingly numerous, Glassner's message is simple: somehow Americans have come to prefer hysteria to facing our true obligations. In this regard, Coleridge's words ring as true today as they did in 1830: "In politics," he wrote, "what begins in fear usually ends in folly."

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