



From American Dream to Orwell's Nightmare

Daniel McCarthy

June 5, 2023

Have schools stopped teaching "Nineteen Eighty-Four" — or are they now teaching it as a playbook for America to follow?

Either way, nearly a third of Generation Z loves Big Brother.

A survey by the Cato Institute finds 29% of Americans aged 18-29 respond affirmatively when asked, "Would you favor or oppose the government installing surveillance cameras in every household to reduce domestic violence, abuse, and other illegal activity?"

In 1791, the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham proposed building a "panopticon" in which people's behavior could be monitored at all times.

But Bentham's panopticon was meant to be a prison. A sizable segment of Generation Z would like to call it home.

Millennials are almost as submissive: 20% of the cohort between the ages of 30 and 44 also wants everyone watched. Among Americans 45 and older, support for such totalitarian surveillance rises no higher than 6%.

Yet the youngest adults are not the only ones with a disproportionate desire to live under the state's all-seeing eye. There are political disparities, too, with 19% of liberals and 18% of centrists agreeing that our daily lives ought to be captured on camera for our own safety.

Only about half as many respondents (9 to 11%) who identify as conservative, very conservative or very liberal say the same thing.

Privacy and civil liberties seem like a "horseshoe" issue that unites the ends of the political spectrum. It's the middle that has the ethic of old East German secret police — or the KGB.

Maybe that's not surprising considering the way that respectable liberal institutions now run themselves.

From Ivy League campuses to the publishing industry and the digital domains of Facebook, there is an Orwellian sense of perpetual emergency, an irrational fear that misinformation and hate speech will overwhelm society unless every utterance is subject to a censor's scrutiny. Even Orwell didn't imagine Newspeak would require new pronouns.

Also unsurprising is that where there are age and partisan divides, there are racial and ethnic ones as well. Thirty-three percent of black Americans would welcome in-home government surveillance, as would 25% of Hispanics. Among whites and Asians, the figures are 9% and 11% respectively.

This makes all too much sense. When liberals demonize and defund police, blacks are most likely to be the victims of resurgent crime. Surveillance may seem like a solution, as a replacement for absent beat cops.

But is a policy like stop-and-frisk worse than creating such a sense of vulnerability in a community that a third of its members would accept spycams in every home?

Libertarians like those at the Cato Institute may be reluctant to think such thoughts.

They've long chosen to overlook the risks to American liberties posed by unlimited immigration. But if a quarter of Hispanics accept totalistic surveillance, does a porous border with Mexico really advance freedom in our country?

Race and national origin are not destiny where political views are concerned, of course. But if conservatives and libertarians believe in American exceptionalism, making America resemble the rest of the world through immigration poses an obvious hazard.

American commitments to the sanctity of property, privacy, and the right to keep and bear arms are not traditions familiar to other parts of the world. If we want to remain exceptional in these regards — which are of the utmost concern to libertarians — we must limit immigration to a rate that allows for assimilation.

Earlier waves of immigrants were susceptible to the violent anarchist enthusiasms of early 20th-century Europe. An immigration pause put an end to that.

Today the bigger concern isn't that another Leon Czolgosz or Sacco and Vanzetti are crossing the Rio Grande, but that our liberal educational institutions encourage alienation from, rather than enculturation into, our nation's exceptional freedoms.

Cato undertook its survey of American attitudes toward surveillance in the home as part of a study of opinions about the prospect of a "central bank digital currency."

The intersection of technology and banking may seem far removed from the question of putting our lives on camera, but Cato vice president and director of polling Emily Ekins had a hunch that proved correct.

She found a strong correlation: "more than half (53 percent) of those who support the United States adopting a CBDC are also supportive of government surveillance cameras in homes, while only 2 percent of those who oppose a CBDC feel the same."

A digital currency would potentially allow the federal government and Federal Reserve to track every dollar Americans spend or receive.

It would facilitate social and socialist experiments like the creation of a universal basic income and enable authorities to delete money from anyone's account.

If we shudder at the thought of Big Brother's eyes in our homes, we should also be alert to his hands in our pockets.