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They love Big Brother

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The results of opinion surveys don't usually shock me. But I confess to being stunned by what Cato Institute researchers were told when they included this question in [a recent poll of 2,000 American adults](#): "Would you favor or oppose the government installing surveillance cameras in every household to reduce domestic violence, abuse, and other illegal activity?"

Government cameras spying on you in your own home? That has to be a no-brainer, right? Surely, I would have thought, nobody wants the feds looking over their shoulder at every moment of every day.

I would have been wrong.

It makes me feel slightly queasy to type these words, but 14 percent of the survey respondents — nearly 1 in 6 — told Cato they would favor such government surveillance. Another 10 percent said they had no opinion either way. In other words, one-fourth of those surveyed wouldn't object to the government watching and recording everything they say and do.

But that's not the worst of it. Support for 24/7 surveillance was especially high among those younger than 30. An astonishing 3 out of 10 respondents born after 1993 said they would welcome round-the-clock monitoring by the government. By contrast, respondents in their 40s, 50s, and 60s were almost wholly opposed.

In George Orwell's great novel "[Nineteen Eighty-Four](#)," a nightmarish masterpiece of life under totalitarianism, every citizen is constantly under the watch of the government. Wherever they are — at home, at work, on public streets, in shops, even in bathrooms — two-way electronic devices keep people under the scrutiny of agents known as the Thought Police.

"The instrument (the telescreen, it was called) could be dimmed, but there was no way of shutting it off completely," Orwell wrote.

How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time. But at any rate they could plug in your wire whenever they wanted to. You had to live . . . in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized.

First published in 1949, "Nineteen Eighty-Four" was Orwell's warning of what unchecked state power could turn into — a warning informed by the horrors of Nazi Germany and the Soviet

Union, with their cults of personality, unremitting deceit, repression of dissent and independent thought, and use of technology to destroy privacy. The sinister telescreen reinforced the right of the state — symbolized by Big Brother — to see and hear everything. Private conversations, words written in a diary, a rendezvous with a lover: The government could keep tabs on all of it. Winston Smith, the protagonist of Orwell's novel, is no hero. He is a weak and wistful man who resents the regime — and is ultimately broken for it. The book's final words are among the most devastating in all of literature: "He loved Big Brother."

All these years later, with everything we have learned about the evils of unrestrained government, is it really possible that almost a third of Generation Z is prepared to love Big Brother?

"We don't know how much of this preference for security over privacy or freedom is something unique to this generation (a cohort effect) or simply the result of youth (age effect)," writes Emily Ekins, the Cato Institute's director of polling. She hypothesizes that Americans who grew up during the Cold War with an awareness of the elaborate Soviet apparatus of repression learned early on to recognize the "dangers of giving the government too much power to monitor people." Members of Generation Z, on the other hand, came of age after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, so they never internalized the evils of an all-seeing state.

Color me skeptical. Totalitarian tyranny didn't vanish with the end of the Cold War. Monstrous governments in the 21st century are no less oppressive than the Soviet Union was in the 20th. Think of the cruelties inflicted by today's regimes in China, Iran, or North Korea. The thought of being watched at all times by government cameras should be as unnerving to Americans under 30 as it is to their parents and grandparents.

A better explanation, perhaps, is that Generation Z has been indoctrinated to regard safety, not freedom, as the highest good — so much so that many would rather be under the nonstop watch of the state than face the possibility of being abused or endangered.

If so, they are in for a fearful awakening. What little protection they might gain from being under the authorities' constant watch is nothing compared with the peril they would face. Benjamin Franklin's famous admonition is as relevant as ever: "Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety." Inviting Big Brother into your home will not keep Gen Z-ers safe. And by the time they realize what they have given up, it will be too late to get it back.