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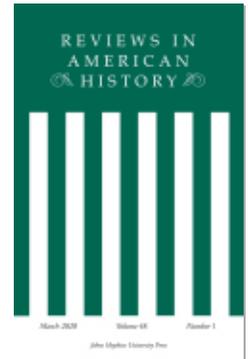
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A NATION RULED BY ITS FEARS

Joseph Crespino

Elaine Tyler May, *Fortress America: How We Embraced Fear and Abandoned Democracy*. New York: Basic Books, 2017. 256 pp. Notes, index. \$30.00.

America is the land of the free and the home of the brave. It's one of the first things American schoolchildren learn, and the last thing fans sing before the ballgame starts. Whatever you may think about the deep roots of this national myth, in *Fortress America: How We Embraced Fear and Abandoned Democracy*, Elaine Tyler May argues that, at least since the Second World War, it's all been a bunch of nonsense. Far from the bold, independent, self-reliant people that many Americans imagine themselves to be, they, in fact, have been a people ruled by fear: fear of the bomb in the atomic age, fear of Reds during the Cold War, fear of racial minorities and independent women in the 1960s and '70s, and fear of criminals, particularly black male criminals, ever since.

Regents Professor at the University of Minnesota, May is a leading figure in the cultural history of post-World War II America. She uses this expertise to reveal surprising links between a variety of cultural and political phenomena that have shaped the America we live in today. Take, for example, her discussion of the American romance with vigilantes. In an era marked by rising concerns over lawlessness and the inability of established authorities to contain it, antisocial loners who in another context would be viewed as threats to order and the common good come to be seen as heroes. They are fearless individualists unconstrained by societal norms who act to establish rough justice.

American moviemakers have always adored such figures, and May traces their popularity in the postwar period from Mickey Spillane through Clint Eastwood and Charles Bronson to the endless parade of blockbuster superhero films today. It might seem innocent enough, an updating of the centuries-old American fascination with cowboys and outlaws, until one considers how such ideas have influenced American law and society. May discusses the controversies around real-life vigilantes such as Bernie Goetz, the subway murderer turned folk hero of the 1980s, and George Zimmerman, who shot and killed African American teenager Trayvon Martin in 2012, and links them to the controversy surrounding "stand your ground laws," which have been

passed in dozens of American states. "Vigilantism has moved from lawless terrorism to lawful self-protection," May writes. "Fear now provides a legitimate rationale for murder, whether or not there is any real threat" (p. 123).

Another exaggerated danger that May discusses is the threat of endangered children. Child safety is at an all-time high, she points out, and yet parents today obsess much more than previous generations about the possibility of child abduction. She approaches this problem historically, showing how by the end of the 1970s increasing numbers of women held jobs that made it impossible for them to supervise their children all day. That historic shift in the labor market roughly coincided with a growing panic in the 1980s over kidnappings and missing children. Popular anxiety played out in advertising campaigns such as the Missing Children Milk Carton Program as well as in television and film. May's arguments bring historical perspective to an issue that Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff have written about in *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2018). May shares those authors' concern about how overly fearful parents have harmed the "well-being, health, and self-confidence" of children (p. 159).

The biggest gap between fear and reality for May involves violent crime. *Fortress America* dovetails with a large number of recent studies that examine the history of the War on Crime, its bipartisan origins, and the deleterious impact it has had on American politics in the last half century. May's book is useful for showing how the fear of crime became an evergreen issue in American politics, one completely divorced from actual crime rates. This development is seen most egregiously today in conservative politics. May quotes Newt Gingrich in 2016 discussing how the "average American" fails to understand low crime rates today. "The average American, I will bet you this morning, does not think that crime is down, does not think that we are safer . . . People feel more threatened. As a political candidate, I'll go with what people feel" (p. 95). Therein lies the villainy, the impulse that leads to absurdities like President Trump's "American carnage" inaugural address, as well as his rhetoric about a border "invasion," which a mass murdering gunman in El Paso invoked in a racist manifesto.

The outrages of Donald Trump's America fuel *Fortress America*. "[W]e have become a paranoid, armed, militarized, racially divided, and vastly unequal vigilante nation," May writes. "The pursuit of security has damaged our public as well as our private lives and hindered our ability to trust each other and our government. In other words, we face a serious risk that our democracy could be totally destroyed" (p. 11). I do not find it hard to understand these sentiments. It *is* hard, however, to imagine May writing them in 2017 if the presidential election the previous year had gone differently. If Hillary Clinton had prevailed in the Electoral College, as she did in the popular vote, and the nation's first African American president had been followed by the

first female president, the historical takeaway of the 2016 election would not have been about the culmination of decades-long fears that threaten American democracy; it would have been about the culmination of the American democratic promise itself, or at least—with the election of the nation's first female president—reaching another milestone along that path. It's a mark of the chaotic times that we live in that such incompatible judgments rest on fewer than 100,000 votes spread across Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin.

Analyzing the recent past in such polarized times as these is not easy. Yet in the rush to explain the present, there are important things about the past that *Fortress America* misses or misstates. Consider the chronology that May lays out in her introduction. She writes that while there has never been "a 'golden age' of security," the closest that Americans came to such a thing was during the 1930s. May points to the passage of the Social Security Act and the "widely shared belief that the government had a responsibility to assist citizens in need" (p. 2). In truth, however, we know that the New Deal's safety net was full of holes. Congress passed social security in 1935, but American seniors didn't receive any payments until 1942, by which time war-time mobilization, not the New Deal, had ended the Depression. Cost-of-living adjustments, which actually made good on the security part of Social Security, did not come into being until 1950, well into the period May describes as one of maximum insecurity.

To call Depression-era America more secure than the post-war period challenges platitudinous aspects of American iconography. Think of the images of breadlines, Hoovervilles, Dustbowl migrants, and emaciated sharecropping families, and compare them with post-war photos of colorful, crowded grocery store aisles, well-tended suburban front yards, and placid college campuses. Certainly, the arms race and the Cold War were terrifying for post-war Americans. Equally fearsome, however, was the Depression-era rise of fascism in Europe and Asia, or the rise of homegrown would-be strongmen like Huey Long and Father Coughlin who stoked demagogic passions stateside, to say nothing of the more immediate fears concerning food, housing, and employment experienced by millions of Americans. In March 1933, the first thing Franklin Roosevelt did upon taking office was urge Americans not to let their fear—that "nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance"—consume them.¹ He had good reasons for doing so.

In writing a history of how Americans came to embrace their fears, it is important to distinguish between the fearful and those who spread the fear for their own gain. Too often, however, that distinction falls by the wayside in *Fortress America*. In a chapter on what May describes as the growing trend toward "self-incarceration" in the 1990s, she lets off the hook the gun-makers, home-security companies, and gated community developers, along with their

well-paid marketing and advertising firms, who stoked the fears that created the fortress mentality she describes. In that same chapter, May notes how large SUVs provide their owners the illusion of safety, when studies show that, in fact, larger cars are less safe than smaller cars. SUV owners were motivated by “psychological needs, more than pragmatism,” May writes (p. 174). But that hardly distinguishes SUV owners from any other type of consumer. The history of advertising is the story of an entire industry organized around the idea that psychological needs, not pragmatic concerns, drive consumption. Americans have always been easily manipulated by powerful interests, and May could have focused more of her ire on those powerful manipulators.

While discussing fears of crime in the mid-1960s, May writes that Americans’ worries were “out of proportion” to the risk (pp. 70, 78). Yet this was a time when the nation’s chief law enforcement officer, Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach, looked at crime statistics and could not determine “whether all women in a city should be constantly terrified by the possibility of being raped by a stranger, or whether in fact, the odds of that happening may be about the same as those of being hit by lightning.”² It is easy to write decades later that fears were overblown. But as life is actually lived, when even the officials who are responsible for policing crime are confused about how much crime is going on, reasonable people err on the side of caution and perhaps fear.

May also makes a number of errors of fact or interpretation that weaken the book. Ronald Reagan did not run for president in 1980 promising “Morning in America” (p. 100). That campaign phrase was not introduced until his 1984 re-election campaign. Barry Goldwater did not make “law and order the centerpiece of his campaign for president in 1964” (p. 63). Law and order emerged as an important concern over the course of that campaign, but the centrality of the issue in conservative politics was still several years away. If law and order really had been the centerpiece of Goldwater’s campaign, he would never have killed the campaign film *Choice*, with its racy, dystopian vision of an American gone amuck, which May spends several pages analyzing. A *US News and World Report* political cartoon that appeared during the controversy surrounding the shooting of four African American youths on a New York subway by Bernie Goetz, who was acquitted by a jury on grounds of self-defense, receives a dubious reading from May. The cartoon depicted a subway car packed with people openly carrying rifles and machine guns. “The message was clear,” May writes. “[T]he way to stop crime was for citizens to carry weapons, become vigilantes, and protect themselves, like Goetz had” (p. 102). A more plausible interpretation is that the cartoon was a parody, not a prescription. The image of an older woman adorned in a fur-lined coat and an armament belt was an absurdist vision of what the world would become if everyone followed Goetz’s model.

Perhaps fear is not as antithetical to democracy as May suggests. One could argue that the period that May examines most closely in this study—the Cold War—is distinctive in American history for being a time when fears were most broadly shared. Certainly, Americans disagreed over how seriously they took the communist threat, but for the three or four decades following the end of World War II the vast majority of Americans shared a common fear that authoritarian communism might one day supplant democratic capitalism around the globe. It has become a staple of twentieth-century historiography that Cold War concerns were at the root of a number of progressive political accomplishments in the postwar period: a high progressive marginal tax rate that helped fund the arms race and contributed to broad income equality; bipartisan support for far-reaching civil rights legislation that transformed politics and society in the American South, which had long given the lie to America's egalitarian ethos; bipartisan support for overturning an explicitly racist immigration system that had been in place since the 1920s; and free health care for the elderly and the poor, a partial fulfillment of one of the unaccomplished goals of the New Deal era. The list could go on.

Indeed, if history is any guide, it may be that if and when Americans are able to move beyond the intense polarization and division of our present moment, the thing that will unite us will not be our shared hopes, but our common fears.

Joseph Crespino is the Jimmy Carter Professor of History at Emory University. His most recent book, *Atticus Finch: The Biography—Harper Lee, Her Father, and the Making of an American Icon*, was published in 2018 by Basic Books.

1. "First Inaugural Address of Franklin D. Roosevelt," March 4, 1933, Avalon Project, Yale Law School, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/froos1.asp.

2. Quoted in Michael W. Flamm, *Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Unrest, and the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s* (2007), 125.