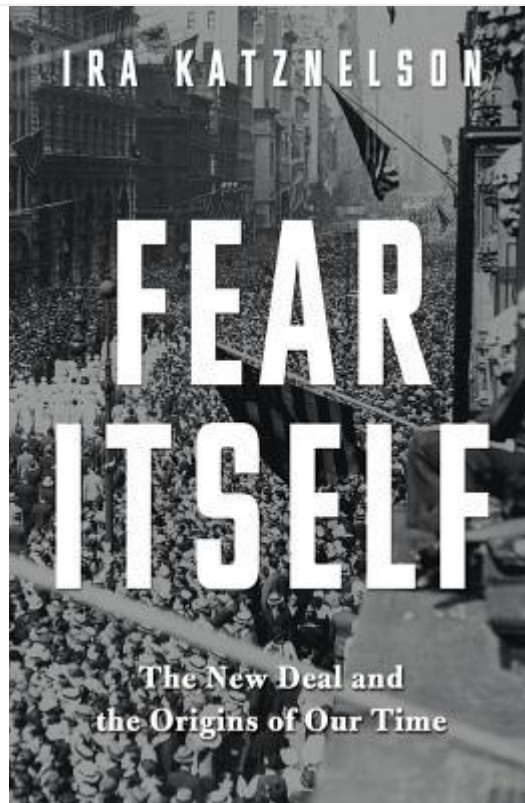


# {essays in history}

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## Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time



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**Reviewed Work(s)**

*Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time.* By Ira Katznelson (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013). Pp. 706. Cloth, \$29.95.

It should truly come as no surprise that a work entitled *Fear Itself* deals with the issues of fear in public and private life. That it permeates Ira Katznelson's new book, soaking into the reader from page one and building throughout the book's epic breadth, astounds. Katznelson does not shy away from fear, instead wrapping his arms around it and showing how perceived political, social, and economic instability fired the engine of legislative creation during the New Deal era—a period that he identifies with the presidencies of Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. Attempting to protect the ideals of liberal democracy, market-based capitalism, and global security, New Dealers accepted many compromises, most notably with groups that espoused less-than-democratic ideals—Soviet Russia, Southern white supremacists, and the architects of a crusading national security state. As Katznelson proclaims in the book's introduction, “This is a book about democracy and fear” (8).

Katznelson portrays Congress as the central figure of the New Deal era, a marked transition from the often hagiographic portrait painted of the time period. FDR, Truman, Hoover, Stalin and other traditional “larger than life” figures play their parts, but U.S. senators and representatives (like Millard Tydings, Sam Rayburn, and Theodore Bilbo) appear much more prominently. Katznelson brings the legislative process to the forefront, particularly analyzing the power wielded by Southern, Democratic, Jim Crow legislators during the New Deal era. Southern lawmakers walked a tightrope unique in American history; the majority espoused a populist message that favored New Deal economic planning in the hope that it would end the colonial nature of the New South, but feared the social impact of new policies that might end the racial hierarchy practiced in the old Confederacy. Using tools from his background in political science, Katznelson expertly charts the changing voting patterns of Jim Crow legislators. At first strongly in favor of government economic planning and control, these same representatives broke with the remainder of the Democratic Party during the rise of big labor (particularly threatened by the CIO and their black-inclusive organizing efforts). This fear of biracial labor organization fueled

legislative actions that halted the radical portions of the New Deal, fought furiously against the suffrage of black soldiers amidst the global carnage of World War II, and gave sweeping powers to the executive branch to weed out “subversives” during the early days of the Cold War.

Instead of simply focusing on domestic issues (a too prominent feature of New Deal historiography, Katznelson claims), *Fear Itself* views domestic and foreign issues as intertwined portions of a whole. “By elevating the New Deal to a global drama,” Katznelson writes, “the book refuses to treat domestic and international affairs as disconnected subjects” (9). The permutations of the New Deal can only make sense if viewed alongside the apparent efficiency and mass acceptance of totalitarian regimes in Europe. One of the most striking portions of the work details the overtures the United States made to fascist Italy during the 1930s and how national leaders viewed the state crafted by Mussolini and his black shirts as a potential example of how to exit the dreariness of the Great Depression. Rather than see an expansive federal government weaken state’s rights (and ultimately Jim Crow segregation), Southern lawmakers heralded constitutionalism and democratic values to retard the more radical elements of the New Deal. When war broke out in Europe, the same lawmakers crafted an expansive foreign policy of intervention that Katznelson terms “the first crusade,” a rejection of isolationism and affirmation of global democratic values. These ideals persisted after World War II, providing the ideological foundation for a national security state that demanded unwavering loyalty.

*Fear Itself* is vast. By unearthing the legislative processes of the New Deal and placing them alongside notions of fear in domestic and foreign affairs, Katznelson not only creates a significant new historiographical reinterpretation of the era, but also helps to chart the path towards our present state of affairs. The epilogue, detailing the ascension of Eisenhower to the presidency, shows how the Republican victory of 1952 acted as a reaffirmation of the New Deal and its economic and foreign policies. The birth of the national security state, the decline of labor as an independent political force, the rise of special interests in national politics, the burgeoning business lobby and the occasionally muted populist response—all are born out of a new American revolution, a revolution that redefined the relationship between the government and its citizens. The “Faustian terrible compromise” made with

segregationists preserved the New Deal, while allowing “human suffering on the most existential scale” (486). And yet, the vestiges of New Deal radicalism animated a greater quest for democratic expansion, most noticeably the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and ‘60s.

Katznelson’s epic is tortured and optimistic at the same time, a gripping and passionate book. The interdisciplinary nature of the work should appeal to a large audience, and honestly, *Fear Itself* deserves it. Beyond just a dynamic reinterpretation of events, the book serves as a blueprint to how a historian of the first caliber can dissect complex issues, and then reincorporate them into a greater narrative. Katznelson’s new classic should be widely read, studied, and discussed.

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