

The year of prophecy?



As the year 1984 comes to an end, so too does the prophecy of doom put forward by the late George Orwell. His epic masterpiece Nineteen Eighty-four stands as a warning to all humanity, one that was used by many to hauntingly predict the demise of democracy in this calendar year. I have chosen to look at George Orwell's message, his fictional "Big Brother" and other writings in this week's feature. I hope you, the reader, will enjoy this insight.

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Excerpts have been taken from Paul Gray's impressive feature on Orwell, November 28, 1983, Vol. 122, No. 23, "Time Magazine."

No armageddon has arrived, nor are we literally programmed by the computers we created but the imminence of an ultimate confrontation has presented itself closer than many of us would like to accept. George Orwell was a man of insight, a humanist and a genius in the use of our English language. The value of his works will last forever in the libraries of time. The futuristic fable he had planned to call "the last man in Europe" left an ominous credit to his genius. "1984" as it was retitled was written in 1948, it has been read by millions of people worldwide in 62 languages. It is the story of Winston Smith, a minor bureaucrat in the totalitarian state of Oceania. War with the world's two other superpowers, Eurasia and East Asia, is constant, although the pattern of hostilities and alliances keeps changing. Winston works at the ministry of truth, rewriting old newspaper stories to conform with party ideology. He uses the official language "Newspeak", a version of English watered down to make unorthodox opinions impossible to conceive. Privacy has vanished. Waking and sleeping all party members are observed by two-way telescreens; posters everywhere proclaim "Big Brother is Watching You." "Down with Big Brother," he also begins a love affair with Julia, a co-worker at his office, another heinous offence. The Junior Anti-Sex league indoctrinates the virtues of celibacy; procreation will soon be carried on solely through artificial insemination (artsem in Newspeak). All personal loyalty belongs to the party. Winston and Julia are caught by the thought police and hauled off to the ministry of love. After being relentlessly tortured he begs that his ultimate punishment be inflicted on Julia instead. This betrayal eliminates the last trace of his integrity. He has become a good party member!

For myself as a reader, the concept of Big Brother and the advent of 1984 offers some unsettling moments. The abstract slogans of Nineteen Eighty-Four: War is Peace; Freedom is slavery; Ignorance is strength, are all alive in repressive regimes everywhere and seem to be gaining momentum as tools for oppression of free peoples even in our developed world.

There was nothing odd about Orwell's interest in language. Time Magazine reported last year, "Orwell realized that the manipulation of speech could be every bit as deadly as the bearing of arms." He reminded all that would listen that Hitler had risen to power in Germany through persuasion; that Stalin had obscured massive crimes through the smokescreen of inactivity. He also warned on the eve of W.W. II, that matters could deteriorate: "The terrifying thing about modern dictatorships is that they are something entirely unprecedented. Their end cannot be foreseen. In the past every tyranny was sooner or later overthrown, or at least resisted, because of human 'nature', which as a matter of course desired liberty... The radio, press-censorship, standardized education and the secret police all exist in today's society as reminders of tyranny. What Orwell

All writers are vain, selfish, and lazy, and at the very bottom of their motives their lies a mystery. Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand. For all one knows that demon is simply instinct that makes a baby squall for attention. And yet it is also true that one can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one's own personality. Good prose is like a windowpane.

From *Why I Write*, 1947

Our own society is still, broadly speaking, liberal. To exercise your right of free speech you have to fight against economic pressure and against strong sections of public opinion, but not, as yet, against a secret police force. You can say or print almost anything so long as you are willing to do it in a hole-and-corner way. But what is sinister... is that the conscious enemies of liberty are those to whom liberty ought to mean most. The big public do not care about the matter one way or the other... They are not in favor of persecuting the heretic, and they will not exert themselves to defend him... The direct, conscious attack on intellectual decency comes from the intellectuals themselves.

From *The Prevention of Literature*, 1946

The gentleness, the hypocrisy, the thoughtlessness, the reverence for law, and the hatred of uniforms will remain, along with the suet puddings and the misty skies. It needs some very great disaster, such as prolonged subjugation by a foreign enemy, to destroy a national culture. The Stock Exchange will be pulled down, the horse plough will give way to the tractor, the country houses will be turned into children's holiday camps, the Eton and Harrow match will be forgotten, but England will still be England, an everlasting animal stretching into the recognition and yet remain the same.

From *"The Lion and the Unicorn"*, 1941

PEACE IS JUST AROUND THE CORNER



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referred to as "mass-suggestion" is a real science in the modern world. It is so easy to draw parallels from Orwell's work and its thought-provoking passages. One need only read Orwell's "Animal Farm" to become an expert on the evils of exploitation. In this book the abused and over-worked animals rebel against the rule of the exploiting farmer Mr. Jones; but the workers paradise is soon commandeered and betrayed by a pig (who resembles Joseph Stalin). His credo: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" stands as a paradox in today's modern world where utopian idealism often falls prey to the abuses of power. To me, Orwell's greatest accomplishment was to remind us that people, individuals can think for themselves. At a time in history when many would prefer to march to ideology over ideals, which we share as humans, Orwell stands as a true statesman of the people.

It is an irony that Orwell had an incredible affection for humankind's most innate quality; "To think," he felt that by thinking we could correct the deficiencies of our society and begin to value knowledge as the way to change the world. In "Road to Wigan Pier," one of his most respected works he expresses the belief that "economic injustice will stop the moment we want it to stop, and no sooner, and if we genuinely want it to stop the method adopted hardly matters." "Political chaos", he continued to stress, "is connected with the decay of language...one can probably bring about some changes by starting at the verbal end."

I firmly believe that what Orwell wanted was a return to logic, for mankind to see the lunacy of our actions, to react before it's too late, through dialogue and faith in humanity. I think this is the key to Orwell's message, the notion of dialogue and speech as guardians for freedom. Many people have used Orwell, not unlike Franz Kafka as examples of the horrifying twentieth-century decline in democratic principles. Often the gloomy picture Orwell creates is mired separate from his method and thus much of his message is lost.

If one considers the similarities between Big Brother and Big Government or Social Security cards and the thought police, Oceania and the Soviet Union then Orwell's prophecy was not strictly sci-fi, but a warning to humanity, a warning that day by day is becoming more of a reality.

For anyone that has read Orwell the message is clear: time is running out! I strongly suggest for any reader the virtues of familiarizing one's self with Orwell, at the very least it is thought provoking and easily understood. As a last point, the date "1984" should not be taken as a finite prophecy but as an exemplifying title for a work that has lasted 38 years and will continue far into the future as a warning to mankind.

"Big Brother is watching you"!

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