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1984

*William H. Rehnquist**

1984. By *George Orwell*. London: Plume. Centennial Edition 2003. Pp. xxvi, 339. \$14.

1984 by George Orwell was published in 1949. Set in London thirty-five years in the future, the world has greatly changed. It is now dominated by only three powers — Eastasia, composed of China, Japan, and Southeast Asia; Eurasia, composed of continental Europe and Northern Africa; and Oceania, composed of North and South America and the British Isles. The latter no longer exists as a political entity — they are known as Airstrip Seven. But London is still London, the capital of Airstrip Seven.

The novel recounts the life of Winston Smith, a midlevel bureaucrat in a society totally controlled by the Party. At the top are members of the Inner Party, who have luxurious living accommodations and all they want to eat or drink. At Winston's level — the Outer Party — there is only surveillance and scarcity. Every flat has a telescreen in it which cannot be turned off. The telescreen is a two-way system, which brings into the home the Party's propaganda, but also enables watchers at some unknown headquarters to view whatever is going on in the home. Members of the Outer Party have to settle for tasteless food and foul-tasting synthetic gin.

Winston works at the Ministry of Truth, which as he realizes, deals in lies. His job is to process orders coming to him through a pneumatic tube. Much of his work consists of altering past records or back issues of newspapers to make them conform to party doctrine. This doctrine is concerned not only with slogans and ideas, but with facts. For example, Oceania is always at war, either allied with Eurasia against Eastasia, or allied with Eastasia against Eurasia. But the general public — more than three-quarters of whom consist of "proles" who have no part at all in the government — cannot be trusted to understand why — if there is a why — the alliances constantly shift back and forth. Therefore, if Oceania is currently at war with Eurasia and allied with Eastasia, all past references to Eastasia as an enemy must be obliterated. This is Winston's work.

Every morning just before 11 a.m., all the workers in Winston's

* Chief Justice of the United States. B.A. 1948, M.A. 1948, Stanford; M.A. 1950, Harvard; LL.B. 1952, Stanford. — Ed.

Department at the Ministry of Truth gather before a huge telescreen in a central hall on the floor where they work. There they watch the *Two Minutes Hate*. Promptly at 11 a.m., the face of Emmanuel Goldstein, branded an Enemy of the People, flashes on the screen. He was once a party leader, but he engaged in counterrevolutionary activities, was sentenced to death, and somehow escaped to no one knows where. There he is, supposedly still engaged in conspiracy against the Party. On the telescreen, Goldstein delivers a puerile and exaggerated attack on the Party, and on its leader, Big Brother. As they watch, the workers at the Ministry of Truth begin to leap up and down, shouting in paroxysms of fear and hate at the figure on the screen. At the end of the two minutes, Goldstein's image fades and is replaced by the face of Big Brother himself, black haired with a black moustache, calm and powerful.

Winston, unfortunately for him, is a rebel. On the very morning on which the book opens, he sits in an alcove of his apartment which cannot be seen by the telescreen, and writes in his diary several times "I HATE BIG BROTHER." Just thinking bad thoughts, without ever writing them down, is a "thoughtcrime" punishable by death if discovered by the Thought Police.

The book is devoted to Winston's efforts to live a life which would have been thought normal in 1949, its year of publication, and to search out a shadowy underground opposition group known as the Brotherhood. He has a love affair with another younger party member, Julia, who is also a rebel. He has separated from his wife because her conversation consists principally of mechanical recitations of the party line. Julia, on the other hand, though not concerned with large political issues, is a spunky rebel by nature, defying authority because she enjoys doing it. They find a place for an assignation in a part of London peopled only by the proles. But the party network is too pervasive for them; they are betrayed to the Thought Police, imprisoned, and brutally tortured. Winston emerges broken in both body and spirit, but even this is not enough for his custodians. He is taken to the dreaded Room 101, after which, as the book ends, he realizes that far from hating Big Brother, he loves him.

I read this book about a year after it came out, when I was a first year law student. Now, 55 years later, my granddaughter who is a high-school sophomore has it assigned for her Honors English class. The book made a tremendous impression at the time it was published and obviously is of continued interest today. It sold eleven million copies and was translated into twenty-three languages. In 1956 Hollywood made a movie based on the novel. Book reviews both in the United States and Great Britain were generally favorable, recognizing it as an

important work. The review in *Pravda*, the Communist daily, was predictably critical, saying:

It is clear that Orwell's filthy book is in the spirit of such a vital organ of American propaganda as the *Reader's Digest* which published this work, and *Life* which presented it with many illustrations. Thus, gruesome prognostications, which are being made in our times by a whole army of venal writers on the orders and instigation of Wall Street, are real attacks against the people of the world¹

I am sure that when the sophomores in my granddaughter's high-school class read the book, it will seem to them like a work of science fiction, in a setting conceivable only on some other planet. But in England in 1949, it would have had a more familiar feeling. To understand why, one must look both at the situation in Europe right after the end of World War II, and at the philosophical debate which was going on at the same time in England and the United States.

World War II had ended four years earlier in victory for the Allies — the United States, Great Britain, and Soviet Russia — against Germany, Italy, and Japan. During the German occupation of most of Europe from 1940 to 1945, members of all political parties — Communist, Socialist, and Center Right — fought together in the underground against the Nazis. But with the coming of peace, it was necessary to establish new governments in many of these countries. As the war was ending, the Allies at the Yalta Conference agreed that the Russian army should continue to push toward Berlin from the east, while the Allied troops should continue their drive from the west. The result of this agreement was that Russian troops controlled all of Eastern Europe. Would the USSR impose Communist governments on the countries in this region?

Disagreements soon arose between the Allies, with Russia opposing the United States, Great Britain, and France. Winston Churchill, the wartime leader of Great Britain, in a speech delivered at Fulton, Missouri in 1946, spoke of an Iron Curtain having fallen across Eastern Europe.

In Czechoslovakia, a provisional government had been established right after VE Day, and parliamentary elections were held in 1946. The Communists obtained a plurality of the votes, with the Socialists the runners up. These parties cohabited uneasily for two years, while the Communists developed extragovernmental "cells" throughout the industrial sector. Two years later, the Communists staged a bloodless coup. The result was the open incorporation of Czechoslovakia into the Soviet sphere of influence. There were no more free elections in that country.

1. I. Anisimov, PRAVDA, May 12, 1950, reprinted in GEORGE ORWELL: THE CRITICAL HERITAGE 282-83 (Jeffrey Meyers ed., 1975).

A few months after the demise of democracy in Czechoslovakia, the Russians, perhaps emboldened by that success, began the blockade of the Allied sector in Berlin. The city was an island inside the Soviet zone of occupation, but supplies had flowed freely to it from the Allied sectors in the west by rail and auto since the zones were set up in 1945. But on June 24, 1948, the Russians shut down rail and auto traffic from the Allied sector into their zones of occupation in Berlin.

Two days later, the U.S. Air Force began flying C-47 transport planes from Wiesbaden in their zone to Berlin. Soon U.S. and British planes were flying what became known as the Berlin Airlift over two twenty-mile wide corridors established in 1945. Over fifteen months, these planes flew 300,000 missions — the planes departing at three-minute intervals — and delivered one-and-a-half million tons of coal and more than half a million tons of food to the starving city's two-and-a-half million inhabitants. Finally in May, 1947, the Russians relented and lifted the blockade. The Allies had won the first confrontation of the Cold War.

Thus to a reader in England in 1949, the society portrayed in Orwell's book represented a possibility — albeit a distant one — that could occur in Western Europe or the British Isles. Whether by conquest or subversion, a totalitarian regime might be imposed sometime in the future.

In England and in the United States during this period a philosophical debate was going on between those who favored a free-market economy and those who favored a planned, socialist economy. Those who favored socialism — H. G. Wells, for example — urged two primary reasons for it. First, with all of the technological progress in the first part of the twentieth century, industrial producers had been able to operate on a larger scale and become more and more interdependent. The economy had grown so complex that only state planning would assure the efficient distribution of goods.

Wells also argued that capitalism results in an unjust distribution of goods, with a small number of the very rich at the top and a vast number of those living in poverty or near poverty at the bottom. If the state took over the production of goods, these inequities could be corrected or at least mitigated.

Opponents of the Socialists — F. A. Hayek, for example — challenged each of these arguments. First, they argued that the necessary interdependence of the economy, far from being a reason for abandoning the free market in favor of a planned economy, was an added reason for retaining it. Their arguments were similar to Adam Smith's a century and a half earlier: impersonal market forces are a far more certain method of matching the supply of goods to the demand for them than could possibly be achieved by any governmental bureau. The opponents' position on this part of the argument was dramatically vindicated in the remaining years of the twentieth century, first by the

comparison of East and West Germany at the time of their reunification, and then by the abandonment of state-directed economies in other countries which had been behind the Iron Curtain.

With respect to the second reason urged for a planned economy — the attainment of a more “just” society — opponents argued that the goal was illusory, and that it could not be achieved without an unacceptable sacrifice of traditional freedoms. Support for a planned economy was motivated principally by a desire for economic security, and it could be accomplished only by giving the government the power to direct where each individual would work, and how much he was paid. From the employee’s point of view, his employer — whether the state or a multitude of private employers — would always have that power. But with numerous private employers some choice was afforded to the employee — not the case when the state was the only employer.

Opponents of socialism also claimed that a state-planned economy, such as prevailed in Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, and Fascist Italy, would likely bring with it the desire to control information and suppress dissent. If a “five-year plan” decreed by the government were to succeed, criticism would have to be muted. Opponents also asserted that the distribution of rewards under a state-directed economy would necessarily be arbitrary, since no one formula for so complicated a task could command general agreement.

The opponents were less convincing with respect to this second ground for rejecting socialism. They cited examples from European countries such as Communist Russia, Nazi Germany, and Fascist Italy, which had become totalitarian. But none of these nations had the long tradition of freedom of the press or freedom of opportunity that England and the United States had. The British Labour Party won a commanding majority in the election of July, 1945. The government thereupon proceeded with some nationalization, and some added measures looking toward “cradle-to-the-grave” security for everyone. But the Tories returned to power in 1951, and governed for the next thirteen years. There was no noticeable diminution of free speech or freedom of the press during the period of the Labour government.

Why, then, did Orwell choose Great Britain as the site of his novel? One obvious reason is that England was his native country and so he knew it best. But he gave a different explanation immediately after the publication of the book:

My recent novel is NOT intended as an attack on Socialism or on the British Labour Party (of which I am a supporter) but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralised economy is liable and which have already been partly realised in Communism and Fascism. I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily *will* arrive, but I believe (allowing of course for the fact that the book is a satire) that something resembling it *could* arrive. I believe also that totalitarian ideas have

taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere, and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences. The scene of the book is laid in Britain in order to emphasise that the English-speaking races are not innately better than anyone else and that totalitarianism, *if not fought against*, could triumph anywhere.²

Perhaps Orwell's widely read book itself helped to discourage any possible effort by a government to curb these freedoms.

Several reviewers compared Orwell's book to Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, which had been published a few years before.³ Both books depicted the worst aspects of a totalitarian society, but in distinct ways. Rubashyev, the central figure in Koestler's book, is arrested at his home in the middle of the night. He had once been a leading figure in the governing hierarchy, being shown in one photograph as sitting only two seats away from "No. 1," Koestler's counterpart of Orwell's Big Brother. But he has now fallen out of favor, and is grilled relentlessly in a series of "hearings" by different party functionaries. Ultimately, he signs a confession of his many deviations from the party line, and is taken before a firing squad and shot.

Winston Smith is no Rubashyev. He has never been more than a minor functionary in the second level of the party. His total debasement occurs at the end of the book, and to me at least, it is not the only important impression of the new society conveyed by Orwell.

The other is the completely deadening effect of the regime on the civil servants. They are not "proles" — the bottom 85% of society who play no part in its governance. They are the educated bureaucracy necessary for any government to succeed. But they are drones who simply obey the commands of unknown party leaders. Originally their submission may have been through fear of expressing any doubt or ideas of their own, but later they simply have no doubts, nor any ideas of their own. Oceania's continuously shifting alliances with Eastasia and Eurasia raise no question in their minds, because they have lost whatever critical faculty they might once have had. All of the information available to them is controlled by Big Brother, and he may view anything that goes on in any of their homes. Watching the Two Minutes Hate, they respond with uncritical — nay, Pavlovian — cries of hatred toward Goldstein.

Koestler's novel about Rubashyev brilliantly captures the totalitarian dialectic, but the average reader would not identify with Rubashyev, a fallen leader of a great country. But the average reader can identify with Winston Smith, a midlevel bureaucrat who is broken for minor crimes against the regime. Big Brother decides what conduct is criminal; and crimes and sentences are determined not by courts,

2. GEORGE ORWELL: *THE CRITICAL HERITAGE* 24 (Jeffrey Meyers ed., 1975).

3. ARTHUR KOESTLER, *DARKNESS AT NOON* (Daphne Hardy trans., 1941) (1940).

but by the Thought Police.

Winston thought for himself, and rebelled at last against the iron grip of the Party. He was finally betrayed by a confidant, and turned over to the Thought Police. In nations governed by the rule of law, thoughts which are never translated into action are not criminally punishable. But no such principle regulates the activities of the Thought Police. Winston is tortured, and confesses to crimes which he committed — such as hating Big Brother — and to crimes which he has not committed. He confesses to having murdered his wife, even though he knows she is alive and well. The final debasement comes when he realizes, at last, that far from hating Big Brother, he loves him.

Orwell does not tell us how Big Brother's regime came to power in Oceania. There are vague references in the text to the wars of the 1950's, and perhaps the change from a liberal democracy to a totalitarian tyranny occurred as an aftermath of them. Or perhaps the change came gradually, as James Madison once predicted: "I believe there are more instances of the abridgement of the freedom of the people by gradual and silent encroachments of those in power than by violent and sudden usurpations."⁴ Whatever its origins, Big Brother's regime has resulted in a crushing of the individual spirit of the citizens of Oceania. The few who resist are tortured and end up loving Big Brother; the great majority is so deadened by the regime that its members never strayed from their love for him.

1984 is well worth reading today for more reasons than one. It is, first of all, a "good read"; Winston is a sympathetic character, and his small successes and large tribulations will engage the reader. On another level, *1984* is worth reading as an allegory or fable. It teaches us that totalitarian regimes need not rely extensively on gulags or other forms of imprisonment to stay in power. Indeed, imprisonment may be a far less effective measure than those employed by Big Brother. Most of the citizens of Oceania about whom Orwell writes are free to go about their daily lives. But this freedom is no more than that given to a pet dog or cat by its master. Spiritually and intellectually, they are prisoners of Big Brother.

The threat of totalitarian rule is, from the point of view of Western Europe, much more remote now than it was in 1949 when the book was published. But in other parts of the world, it is not merely a threat but a reality. The book stands as a warning against letting liberal democracy slip away or be extinguished where it already exists and as a testament to the meager lives of those who presently live under such a regime.

4. JOHN BARTLETT, *BARTLETT'S FAMILIAR QUOTATIONS* 367 (Justin Kaplan ed., Little, Brown and Co. 17th ed. 2002).