



## Orwell's "1984" Revisited

Let's explore some of the ways *1984* is being fulfilled.

In the novel, all people of the world fall under three regional governments — Oceania (where the book's protagonist, Winston Smith, lives), Eurasia, and Eastasia. This is reminiscent of the regional approach to global governance (European Union, North American Union) now unfolding.

### Altering Facts

The Party that runs Oceania has a slogan: "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past." Winston works in the Ministry of Truth, where newspapers, periodicals, books, and other literature forms are continuously changed according to the government's wishes. For example, if the *Times* reported Big Brother made a speech predicting something, which later did not happen, the *Times* would be subsequently corrected so that it appeared Big Brother had made the correct prediction.

Day by day and almost minute by minute the past was brought up to date. In this way every prediction made by the Party could be shown by documentary evidence to have been correct; nor was any item of news, or any expression of opinion, which conflicted with the needs of the moment, ever allowed to remain on record.

In 1949, the idea of altering back copies of newspapers seemed impossible. However, in today's Internet age, newspapers are struggling to stay in print, and electronic data is increasingly replacing *hard copy* information. If all information eventually becomes electronic, it would be very easy for bureaucrats to change what back copies of newspapers and magazines say — exactly as in Orwell's novel.

Furthermore, even though current society has not advanced to this extreme, history *has* been altered, changing the true nature and records of wars, revolutions, the United Nations, trade treaties, the Federal Reserve, etc.

Although everything in Oceania is in short supply (except that reserved for the elite "Inner Party" members), the government's economics ministry is termed "The Ministry of Plenty." This reminds one of the "Security and Prosperity Partnership" born out of NAFTA, which claims we are enjoying "prosperity" even as millions of jobs are slashed and we drown in inflation. In *1984*, the Ministry of Plenty spews out falsified statistics:





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The fabulous statistics continued to pour out of the telescreen. As compared with last year there was more food, more clothes, more houses, more furniture....

Even today, the U.S. government fudges statistics to make the realities look brighter. For example, *The New American* of June 23, 2008 exposed how the government has continually altered methods of determining the Consumer Price Index. Under Richard Nixon, food and energy costs were eliminated from the new "core CPI." Later:

In 1983, the Reagan administration decided that rising real estate costs were causing the CPI to be overstated, so the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) substituted an "Owner Equivalent" measurement, basing housing costs on what homeowners might get if they were renting their houses. Homes were labeled an investment, and the cost of buying a home (like other investments) was no longer included in the CPI.

Both of the Bush administrations and the Clinton administration further modified how the CPI is determined, each change serving to *lower* reported price inflation. The end result of all these tweaks is that the U.S. now reports an annual price-inflation rate of about four percent, whereas true price inflation is closer to *eight percent* or more. This enables the government to cheat senior citizens out of their Social Security: Social Security payments are ostensibly tied to inflation so that recipients get automatic cost-of-living increases, but payments are based on a distorted CPI, rather than the actual rising costs the elderly face.

In the culture of *1984*, the truth is reversed. Two of the governments's main slogans are "war is peace" and "freedom is slavery." Today, many of yesterday's truisms have also been reversed. For example, homosexuality, once understood as perverted, is now construed as "normal"; abortion, previously a crime, is today a "right"; advocates of traditional family values, once mainstream, are now "extremists."

## **A World Without Freedom**

1984 says:

It was always at night — the arrests invariably happened at night. The sudden jerk out of sleep, the rough hand shaking your shoulder, the lights glaring in your eyes, the ring of hard faces round the bed. In the vast majority of cases there was no trial, no report of the arrest. People simply disappeared, always during the night. Your name was removed from the registers, every record of everything you had ever done was wiped out, your one-time existence was denied and then forgotten. You were abolished, annihilated: *vaporized* was the usual word.

Many film fans are familiar with the 1995 Sandra Bullock thriller *The Net*, about a woman who no longer "exists" after her identity is destroyed by the cyber-manipulations of the movie's villains. And today, victims of real-world identity theft are common. Like money and information, the more your identity becomes electronic, the more it becomes erasable. Orwell warned us that someday identity loss may become a *function of government*.

In *1984*, citizens are under constant electronic surveillance by the Thought Police, not only in the city streets, but through their home televisions, which cannot be turned off. To quote the book:

With the development of television, and the technical advance which made it possible to receive and transmit simultaneously on the same instrument, private life came to an end. Every citizen, or at least every citizen important enough to be worth watching, could be kept for twenty-four hours a day under the eyes of the police.



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Today, with the advent of e-mail and cellphones, governments are increasingly exploiting their ability to spy on citizens in the name of "security," even listening in through cellphones that have been turned off. Security cameras are more and more prevalent in buildings and on streets, and with the recent compulsory upgrading of television from analog to digital, some ask if the government is preparing for an era when televisions *will transmit* as well as receive signals. The U.S. government is offering free \$40 coupons to encourage citizens to make the transition to digital TV — as if entertainment were a constitutional right.

Oceania is continually at war, the wars never being actually won. This resembles the current war on terror, which can never be "won" since the enemy is far less definable than in traditional wars, which were fought against distinct nations, with uniformed armies, that could be forced to capitulate. In 1984, bombs sometimes drop on London (where Winston lives), rousing the people to patriotism. But Winston's lover Julia speculates the bombs "were probably fired by the Government of Oceania itself." This will have a familiar ring to those knowledgeable about the questionable circumstances surrounding events that have propelled America into wars, including the sinkings of the *Maine* and *Lusitania*, Washington's foreknowledge of the Pearl Harbor attack, the questions surrounding the Tonkin Gulf incident, and the pre-9/11 evidence that should have enabled Washington to connect the dots to prevent the worst terrorist attack on American soil.

Oceania uses a language called *Newspeak*. It restricts vocabulary to very few words. Each successive Newspeak dictionary deletes more words. The eventual result is to eliminate ideas unacceptable to the state, since words for those ideas no longer exist. Orwell pointed out that ultimately an older document, such as the American Declaration of Independence, would become unreadable gibberish. Is this unlike today, when "dumbing down" has left American public school students less aware of their country's heritage and even less equipped to read books of the past?

In the novel, Winston is eventually exposed as a "thought criminal" and imprisoned by the Ministry of Love (the secret police). After many tortures, he still retains a shred of independent thinking. To finish breaking him, his jailers bring him to the place every prisoner dreads: Room 101. Room 101 is different for every person. It contains their greatest personal horror. In Winston's case, he has a primal fear of *rats*. His head is placed in a two-compartment cage. The compartment furthest away is filled with hungry sewer rats. If the intervening door dropped, the rats would devour Winston's face. At this point, he completely loses it; he is broken.

At the book's end, the Thought Police have turned Winston free because he no longer constitutes any threat. He believes every bit of propaganda coming from the telescreen. He gazes at Big Brother's image. And the book closes with these words: "He loved Big Brother."

How did the Thought Police know Winston's darkest fear was rats? Because they had him, like other citizens, under continual surveillance through telescreens and other means. Likewise, a government today could discover a person's greatest fear by monitoring his or her e-mails and phone calls, and many ordinary citizens have been monitored by the government's once-secret warrantless electronic search program that was supposed to be limited to overseas communications with terrorists. Compiling a profile of any person would be possible, and such a profile could be used to put a law-abiding citizen on the "no-fly" list for example.

## **Interpreting Orwell**

How is it that Orwell, writing 60 years ago, had such keen insight into the future? According to former



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MI6 officer John Coleman, Orwell was himself attached to MI6 (Britain's version of the CIA). As such, Orwell became aware of the aims and mischief of the power elites. Writes Coleman: "Orwell had to write his startling revelation as fiction to avoid being prosecuted under Britain's Official Secrets Act." It doesn't reduce the chills in anyone's spine to know *1984* was Orwell's last book; he died at 46.

*1984* has been filmed three times. A 1954 BBC television version ran very close to the novel; a 1956 Hollywood production took considerable liberties with the story, to the chagrin of Orwell's widow. The last version, released in 1985, starred John Hurt and Richard Burton in his final role. It stayed very close to the book, and is brutal to watch.

This writer has seen all three versions, but be forewarned: none are readily available on DVD. They must be purchased from rare movie dealers, or through personal sellers, such as on ebay.com. Ironically, the unavailability of the three films raises the question of one more possible evidence that *1984*, where the past simply disappears, is becoming reality.

However, as we went to press, the Hurt-Burton version could be [seen online](#) at Google Video. Be advised that the bleak film, like the novel, contains moments of sex, nudity, and violence, and no two-hour movie can truly capture all the implications of Orwell's book.

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