

We Must Never Forget the Lessons of Orwell's '1984'

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In the wake of recent revelations that the NSA collects data on millions of Americans, sales of the centennial edition of George Orwell's novel "Nineteen Eighty-Four" have soared 5,800 percent on Amazon. During the first 35 years of its life, Orwell's final and most famous book caught the attention of readers throughout the world — at least in those parts where people were free to read the books they chose. Almost three decades after the actual year 1984 has come and gone, relatively few readers are experiencing the chilling prophecies of Orwell's dystopian vision, until now.

In 1949, as George Orwell lay on a sanatorium bed under the shadow of a death that would soon come from tuberculosis and exhaustion, the world received "Nineteen Eighty-Four" and gained a new synonym for tyranny and totalitarianism. In Orwell's nightmare vision the world, after an atomic war, has divided itself into three massive slave states — Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia. The three superpowers are about equal in strength and are continuously at war. But it is a war that nobody can win.

In the hands of the governments absolute power has corrupted absolutely. Each dictatorship possesses an all-pervading control of collective behavior and of thought itself. The past is a pawn in the hands of present policy: When the rulers want to change history, they destroy all old books and periodicals and replace them with new ones. The power elite are indifferent to truth. In effect, there is no truth and there is no past.

It is the same with the people. All dissent is outlawed. Citizens who dare to think antistate thoughts are branded "unpersons" and sent off to "unexist" or be brutally re-educated. The line is rigidly set by Big Brother, the black mustachioed dictator whose dark, penetrating eyes stare down from posters everywhere. Two-way telescreens peer into every room and public place. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU. A wrong facial expression can mean liquidation; there is no such thing as a private life.

For many readers, the most terrifying aspect of "Nineteen Eighty-Four" is not the technological gimmick of the two-way telescreens, but the government's ability to engird thought by restricting its vehicle, language. Orwell forges an iron link between language and mind. If our words are the windows through which we look at the world, reducing the number, size and transparency of those windows limits our ability to view and deal with reality.

The State's most powerful method of thought control is "Newspeak," a modified form of "Oldspeak," or standard English, designed with catchall clichés and fewer words so as to make reflective, creative and unorthodox thought impossible. One of the goals of Newspeak is to diminish the value of language by crippling the rich associations of older words and shrinking the size of the vocabulary. Today evidence of this insidious process is all around us.

Newspeak happens when the original meaning of unique, “one of a kind,” becomes identical with the word unusual, as in “That was one of the most unique seminars I’ve ever attended.” Newspeak happens when we can no longer distinguish between words such as uninterested and disinterested, affect and effect, farther and further, verbal and oral, compose and comprise, reluctant and reticent, energized and enervated and less and fewer. Newspeak happens when we say momentarily when we mean presently and presently when we mean now. “We live, man and worm, in a time when almost everything can mean almost anything,” wrote humorist James Thurber, whose insights weren’t always meant to be humorous.

George Orwell is watching you. Rather than being a pessimistic determinist, Orwell was a committed humanist concerned that we not make our ultimate home on an anthill. More powerfully than any other writer, he warned us that dishonest language is a drug that can put conscience to sleep. He alerted us that when words are used to lie rather than to tell the truth, the house of language grows dark and the human spirit withers.

Please send your questions and comments about language to richard.lederer@utsandiego.com

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