

Brian Tomasik
Due: 3 March 2004

The Prompt

Give your initial reactions to *1984*. What connections do you see between the world today and the world Winston inhabits in the novel?

The Journal Entry

Ultimately, a powerful novel is created not so much through particulars of setting, characters, or events; it is created through those themes or implicit messages that transcend time and place. George Orwell's *1984* continues to be popular (it has long been one of my favorite novels) not because it has become literally true: the world has not become three colossal nation-states, our lives are not constantly monitored through telescreens, the government is not a vast totalitarian conspiracy that vaporizes anyone who has a rebellious thought. Instead, it is the overriding commentary on human nature and the natural tendencies of governments revealed through these details that make *1984* such an enduring work.

One ubiquitous theme throughout *1984* is how easily most people will accept whatever they are told. Most of the Party members, Mr. Parsons for instance, are awed by the statistics of the Ministry of Plenty on the amazing surpluses achieved, yet they fail to combine this with their own experience of inadequate rations and shortages. The proles do not even require impressive data to remain pacified; they are content with the coarse pornography and violence provided to them by the Ministry of Truth. It is a natural human tendency to wish to remain content in ignorance, one that transcends culture and historical period. And even though this ignorance in our society is not the result of a massive government plot to tranquilize the masses, it has similar effects.

Another element of reality that Orwell understood well is the potential for governments to use fear and hatred to inspire blind “patriotism.” In the *Two Minutes Hate*, the telescreens warn of the organized threat of one man—Emmanuel Goldstein—and his Brotherhood to the peace and security of the people of Oceania. The fear and outrage incited in viewers is then channeled into comfort and love for the leader capable of protecting them—Big Brother. Orwell recognized the universal power of fear and hate to seize control of people’s actions and the almost irresistible temptation of governments to take advantage of that fact. The current threats posed by international terrorism are certainly not completely baseless, but the way the Bush administration has amplified the concern far beyond its real level demonstrate that it, too, understands the capacity of fear to create impulsive support for the person in power.

One other interesting aspect of Orwell’s novel is the way the government of Oceania attempts to pretend that its alliances have never changed—that Eurasia has always and will always represent pure evil and that Eastasia has been and will always be an ally. Although the US government made no orchestrated effort to burn all historical records and rewrite the recent past, it was conspicuously silent on the fact that the US had allied with—and allowed its corporations to sell weapons to—Iraq throughout the 1980s, when it was our ally against Iran. When Bush declared US intentions to begin military operations in Iraq, he spoke as if Iraq was, and had always been, our avowed enemy. This idea relates to a concept Noam Chomsky (who was highly influenced by Orwell) has articulated to explain such ignorance of the past even by intellectuals who should know better: the “doctrine of change of course.” Chomsky argues that this theory is invoked every few years by ruling elites to claim that because we are entering a new and

enlightened period, we can forget all of our mistakes in the past. It may not be the complete destruction of all past records as in *1984*, but the basic purpose is the same: to discourage people from learning from the past in shaping the future.

This is one more example of the way George Orwell's novel endures not because of its accurate portrayals of the specific details of modern society but because those specific details outline a broader, universal view of the nature of people and politics.