

NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR

I should share with you the two or three reasons I have chosen such an "unusual" topic for this year's Presidential Address. I had heard that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was a book about a big brother and since I am an only child, that appealed to me. Also, "1984" in addition to being the name of a book is the name for this year. The coincidence didn't escape me. Besides I might not get the chance in 2001 to talk to you about Arthur C. Clark's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

The book in question was almost published as *The Last Man in Europe*. Its publication instead as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* may have been a stroke of genius on Orwell's part. The date has dangled before us for years, giving more credence to the account of Winston Smith because of its attachment to a real year in our lifetime. And of course in the last couple of years the excitement has been building as "that year" approached. As George Steiner has said, "No other book has . . . preempted for itself, a calendar year in the History of man. . . . George Orwell achieved an uncanny coup. He put his signature and claim on a piece of time."¹

It is an appropriate weekend to talk about *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Winston Smith started his diary on April 4, 1984, just over a week ago, and this weekend everyone else is hurridly telling Big Brother all about their financial situations and "under penalties of perjury" swearing that they have given him the amount of money he has demanded from them.

Because of the conflation of the book title with the year, the book would appear to be prophecy even if it was not meant to be. So we discover that Walter Mondale says, "George Orwell predicted that totalitarianism would become the foundation for politics and for society in general. His vision of the world has, fortunately, not become reality. Not in the West, at least."² Giving us an echo, not a choice, John Glenn asserts, "Happily, the depressing and dehumanizing world described by George Orwell in *1984* has not come to pass, at least not in the West."³ The publisher Malcolm S. Forbes tells us, "Big Brother's got all our numbers . . . your credit rating, driving record, travels, income, health, insurance, mortgage--you name it, it's in somebody's computer somewhere. Instead of reducing us to numbers, numbers in the computer have made us each and everyone a readily, near totally documentable individual. By George, how awful right Orwell was."⁴ Norman Lear, who gave us Archie Bunker, Maude, and People for the American Way tells us "Big Brother has arrived, and he is your computer. . . your computer is able to talk to everybody else's computer. That is so Orwellian."⁵ Phyllis Schlafly, who wrote *A Choice Not an Echo*, says that the Soviet Government exerts, "Total control of the individual by the machine of the state. It's exactly what Orwell forecast. . . There is no similarity to what we have in America."⁶

I guess we all have some tendency to compare 1984 (the year) to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (the book). I had often heard the claim that most of Orwell's predictions had come true already, but had not known the origin of the claim. It probably is a 1978 article in *The Futurist* by David Goodman. In the article "Countdown to 1984: Big Brother May be Right on Schedule,"⁷ he claimed to have identified 137 predictions in the book, 80 of which had been realized in 1972. By 1978, when he returned to his list over 100 had come true. Since that is a rate of twenty fulfilled predictions every six years since *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published, one can see why this article caught the attention of many persons.

Although at the rate indicated, 1984 (the year) would yield only 120 correct predictions, Goodman went on to try to show that "the possibility of Orwell's 1984 becoming reality--perhaps even before the date he specified--is clear."⁸

It's obvious now that the events did not occur either before or by the "date he specified" but it sounds like it was such a close shave that I would like to examine his article.

We have to take Goodman's word for the fact that 137 predictions are in the book. Goodman gives us examples of 34 predictions of the sort that he calls "scientific and technological." He also lists thirteen "social and political" predictions. That leaves 90 or almost exactly two-thirds of the predictions unspecified. We again must take Goodman's word for most of the predictions he says have come true. Of the 34 listed scientific and technological predictions, some are hardly that at all, and others have little or no relationship to the basic picture in 1984: *improved* missiles and bombs, *improved* truth drugs, *improved* electrotherapy, *better* techniques for hypnosis, and so forth. Using this procedure even I could be a prophet. And of what relevance is it that we have books written by computer (if we do), three dimensional effects in art, machines that translate voice into print, earthquake and tidal wave control, police patrol helicopters, large telescreens for public viewing, or televised group therapy. It's a little hard even to imagine any negative applications for some of these.

If we turn to the more important items, the social and political ones, we find in most cases either the prediction is unimportant or has not come true. Let's examine them:

- (1) Lotteries run by the state: Unimportant.
- (2) Lack of heating fuels and electricity: False.
- (3) Forced metrification: Unimportant and probably false.
- (4) The merging of gender identities: Boy! George, you may have something there, but probably it's unimportant.
- (5) Denial of objective reality: False or at least no more extensive than it's ever been.
- (6) Newspeak - A language so sparse that original and heretical thought is impossible: Impossible!
- (7) Double think: Again probably no more than in the past.
- (8) Mutability of the past: I think history and archeology are progressing rather than regressing.
- (9) Unwarranted search and surveillance: We're probably freer from unwarranted searches than ever before. I frankly don't know about surveillance--but Goodman probably doesn't either.
- (10) Continuous wars: Maybe we have them but their function isn't as Orwell described them.
- (11) Break-up of the family: Not as extensive as the press would have us believe. Because of increased longevity there are probably more three-generation families than ever before.

(12) Big Brother. Hardly overbearing compared to Orwell's picture.

(13) Public hangings: Even the ghouls of television have not succeeded in making contemporary executions public events.

So we see than Goodman's claims don't bear up under scrutiny.

One of the first critics of Goodman's claims, the socialist writer Burnham Beckwith, originally⁹ (1979) said that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was bad prophesy but was a good warning. But by 1983 he had decided "it is pointless to warn against the adoption of social policies that men are highly unlikely to adopt. . . . I conclude that if Orwell meant to warn his contrymen against a serious danger--the rise of totalitarianism in Britain--he was warning them against an almost imaginary danger."¹⁰

I think surely *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was meant to be a warning rather than prophesy. In fact, Orwell said that its purpose was to show "the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable and which have already been partly realized 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."¹¹

There are two things I fear. One is an event, possibly cataclysmic, this year such that we face a round of "Orwell-told-you-so's." The second is no cataclysmic event so that because of the confusion between prediction, prophecy, and warning, many decide that Orwell was wrong, we're home free, we've survived the threat, and we need worry no more.

There are already columns and articles with titles like "Big Brother has Not Arrived" and "1984: The Year that Never Came." I've mentioned Beckwith's view that Orwell was warning against an almost imaginary danger. Who needs to be warned against that? Even worse, some would say with Joseph Maloney, ". . . Who says 1984 need be avoided? Why would it necessarily be bad? Under *Big Brother*, no one is poor, as we understand poverty. Lives may not have our richness, but they do not have our inequities. Food, housing, clothing, and medical care are provided."¹² So who needs to be warned about that? Societies everywhere do, that's who. And we can't count on Orwell to do the warning. Orwell didn't succeed very well with Beckwith or Malony. In addition, the book is now an anachronism. Who will read it now? It never was original, since its ideas were drawn in such large part from other works he knew, most notably Zamyatin's *We*. And the book is not particularly well written. What should and could have been a gripping tale of the horror of helplessness in a totalitarian society is simply a tale of totalitarianism. This is probably the only year since it was written in which anyone reread the book. I predict that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* will seldom be read after this year.

I don't believe in the infinite perfectability of man, but the infinite corruptability of man might be true. At least history (and current events) shows us enough of corruption and the thirst for power at the expense of others to make an ongoing warning desirable.

The concern over the role that technology plays in all of this is misplaced because the claim that technology is neutral is largely correct. There is little correlation between oppression in society and the level of technical sophistication. It doesn't take technical sophistication to oppress blacks in South Africa or to discriminate against certain groups in this country. It didn't take technical sophistication for Nixon to obstruct justice while in the White House. Nor does it take much to try to keep world news away from the Soviet populus. In fact, technical sophistication works against these things. Electronically transmitted wire service photos of cattle

prods, baseball bats, and fire hoses bring such things to public awareness. Imagine how Nixon must wish that sound activated tape recorders had never been invented. Instead of having access just to the party view in Soviet Bloc countries or just to the three major look-alike TV networks in this country, powerful radio transmitters and satellite channels make alternative views available on every square inch of the earth. Computers and computer networks make storage, retrieval, and transmission of information relatively easy, and make revision of history ('a la *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) very difficult.

It's not, then, technology that needs to be feared. It is the motive behind the application that is dangerous, and what I fear is lack of fear itself. Students that would rather "party" than think. Voters that base their votes on a media image rather than platform and past performance. Newspapers that both save money and increase circulation by concentrating on "lifestyle" sections rather than investigative reporting. (Have you noticed the tendency even in hard news stories to just report someone's report of the facts?)

To safeguard society from tyranny requires that we know tyranny is abhorrant. To prevent bad government we must know what the purpose of government should be. To know how to act in regard to fellow citizens and the laws of our society requires that we know what good actions and laws are. These issues, like most important issues, are philosophical issues. And these philosophical issues like most philosophical issues take time, toil, and tenacity to examine. And they take training. That is where you and I come in. As hard as it is to believe, tomorrow's leaders are in our classes right now. It may be (and probably is) the only training they get in critical thinking about critical issues. We had better make the best of our opportunity.

In closing and while I'm in this pulpit preaching about our philosophical missionary obligation, let me suggest that we consider tithing. Giving a tenth, not of our income for some important cause, but tithing our production. Instead of presenting our writing only to our colleagues to enhance our reputations and chances of promotion, to present a portion of our writing to others. Conventions in other disciplines, public forums, letters and reader opinion pages in newspapers, and journals of opinion are just a few of the places we could share our talents.

One of the few things of which Winston Smith was certain was "We can't win." I, however, think we can.

NOTES

1. George Steiner, "Books: Killing Time," *The New Yorker*, December 12, 1983, p. 168.
2. Quoted in Annie Gottlieb, "Is '1984' Really Here?" *McCall's*, January 1984, p.98.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Quoted in "1984: The Dreaded Year," *Popular Mechanics*, January 1984, p. 60.
5. Gottlieb, *op. cit.*, p. 99.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 355.
7. December 1978, pp. 345-355.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
9. "1984 is Not Our Future," *The Futurist*, April 1978, pp. 111-115.
10. "George Orwell's 1984," *The Futurist*, December 1983, p. 25.
11. Quoted in Steiner, *op. cit.*, p. 184.
12. "Past, Present, and Future 1984's," *The Futurist*, April 1979.