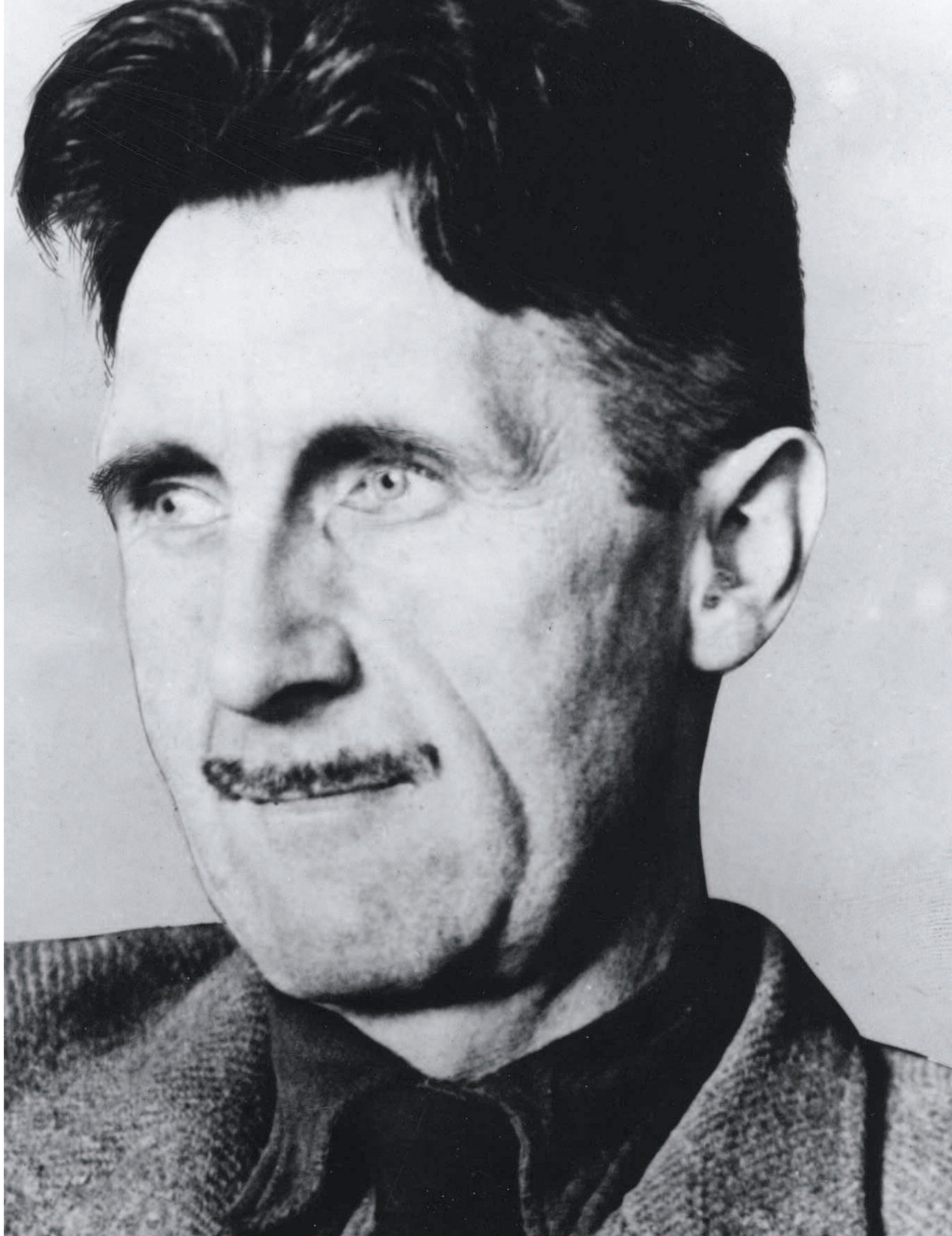
In the 25 years since the iconic film adaptation of George Orwell's dystopia, US society has crept ever closer to its bleak vision of paranoia, surveillance, perpetual war and unthinkingness, fears Tom Palaima

1984: it's coming



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What if George Orwell or his publisher Frederic Warburg had chosen the other title that Orwell was considering for what would be his final book, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? Would a novel called *The Last Man in Europe* have grabbed the public imagination as much as the abbreviated title it now usually goes by, *1984*?

The change from a number written out as words to Arabic numerals in itself mimics the terrifying reduction of words and thoughts in the world Orwell creates. The ideogram 1984 transmits Orwell's vision of a totalitarian state directly to our brains. The title phrase *The Last Man in Europe* might not have led to the word "Orwellian" becoming the universal adjective to describe any society in which the values that make human lives human have been perverted into their opposites by those in power so that they can retain their power.

A book with the title *The Last Man in Europe* also might not have offered the incentive to produce and release, in December 1984, Michael Radford's superb film adaptation with John Hurt as Winston Smith and Richard Burton as O'Brien. I still remember seeing it soon after its release and walking out into nighttime Manhattan near Lincoln Center, feeling drained of emotion and any small belief I then had left in the inherent goodness of human nature or my own significance as a human being. How easy it is to be removed from the stream of history, or never to be part of it in the first place.

It has been 25 years since that movie renewed the power of Orwell's story for readers and viewers. It was easy then in the US, looking, as we Americans always do, at our own society and our place in it, to be smug about how our realised future was not at all like Orwell's "boot stamping on a human face".

Our historical memory was intact and accurate within reason. In recent memory, our political system had worked to protect us. It had seen to the investigation and forced resignation of a president whose corruption was petty in comparison with the Big Brotherish political monsters who then inhabited our nightmares: Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Pinochet, Stalin and Hitler.

In contrast to the earlier Cold War tensions among the real-life equivalents of Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia, President Nixon, before resigning, had made contact with Chinese leaders. At the time Radford's *1984* was released, Mikhail Gorbachev, then second-in-command at the Kremlin, visited London and spent, according to the BBC, five hours "in very friendly talks" with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, signalling a "thaw in relations between the West and the Soviet Union". Gorbachev and his wife Raisa viewed the seat where Karl Marx had written *Das Kapital* in the British Library. History was there in a wooden artefact that had its own verifiable history, unlike the coral in glass that Winston Smith buys for too high a price in his eagerness to have something genuinely old.

> "The post-9/11 War on Terror corresponds to Orwell's vision of a small, heroically mythologised army fighting in distant lands forever. To criticise war is viewed as unpatriotic"

Political activism in the US had brought about changes in civil rights for minorities and had supported the Great Society programmes that addressed poverty, housing, health and education. Women had gained greater control over their own bodies and sexual identities. One informant in an oral history of the Sixties described what it felt like, braless and jean-clad, to be free from being "encased in plastic". Bras, garters, girdles, nylons, skirts and high heels had served the purpose of the red sash that Julia wore in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

By 1984, our society as a whole had moved in the opposite direction to those religious elements advocating sexual mores akin to Orwell's Junior Anti-Sex League. What was called artsem in Newspeak was for us a procedure to bring happiness to couples who otherwise could not have children of their own. In Oceania it was a false virtue propagated by those in power to make sure human beings did not form the strong attachments that come from personal intimacy.

Public opinion had also forced our government to end a senselessly violent and technically undeclared war in South-East Asia. For nine years there was no indication that the

military industrial establishment was going to ramp up toward such full-scale war again. The US invasion of Grenada between October and December 1983, known by a codename even Evelyn Waugh could not have outdone – Operation Urgent Fury – would have been the stuff of satire, except for the 646 casualties. Even so, there was visible opposition to this military action, including a movement among some Democratic congressional representatives to impeach Ronald Reagan.

Unlike Winston Smith's apartment and even O'Brien's home, the places where we lived were secure, except for the intrusion of fixed-line telephones. While there, our private thoughts and actions remained private. National news was still delivered by three major television networks and by quality local newspapers in major cities. Independent journalism had helped remove Nixon and Spiro Agnew from office, draw attention to the brutality of Jim Crow racism in the American South, and bring the horrors of Vietnam's body counts, free-fire zones and Zippo raids to the attention of American citizens back home. For 14 years, what came into homes on a screen via government sponsorship on the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) was benign, educational, even culturally uplifting.

I had read Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in my Jesuit high school with many other boys from Cleveland's immigrant working class. Our parents had saved to send us to Saint Ignatius so that our futures would be good, and we were confident that they would be.

I remember that we talked about some of the big features that I have just surveyed. It was patriotic to know about the differences between our open Western democracy and the closed Stalinist and post-Stalinist Soviet Union whose government shared many tactics with Orwell's Ingsoc: control of information, manipulation of historical truth, spying on common citizens, subordination of the individual to the state, and the corrupt privileges and power wielded by party members.

Two things strike me now as unfortunate and bring me back to my opening question. One is that the only attempt made to make Orwell's novel touch our own experiences was to ask the standard question: "What would Room 101 hold for you?" I suppose it was considered taboo to ask: "What do those of you whose parents or grandparents are proles think of Orwell's descriptions?"

In my Room 101, I substituted spiders for rats, mainly because I was then terrified of spiders and had been fortunate enough never to lay eyes on a rat. I lacked the imagination to make real for myself, emotionally, what Winston Smith saw and felt when the rat-cage mask was strapped on to his face. I have John Hurt and Richard Burton to thank for helping me visualise now what I was then too innocent, sheltered and emotionally unsympathetic to imagine.

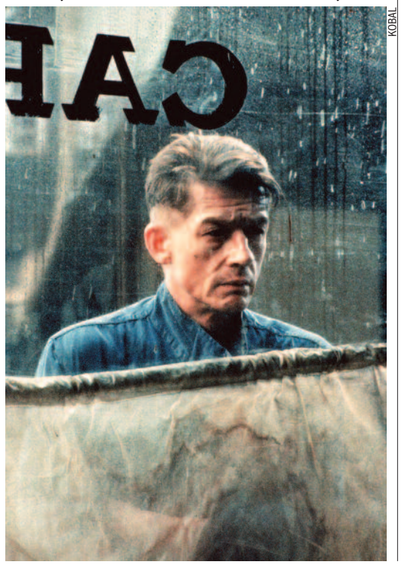
The second unfortunate thing is that the book was not called *The Last Man in Europe*. When I was 15, the 18 years until 1984 seemed a lifetime away. The setting appeared impossibly remote, and the big features we talked about were mostly discussed in the abstract and written in the capital letters that suited the title *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

> **"Its power lies in its unrelenting focus on the last man, Winston Smith – his perspective, powers of observation, survival instincts, dislikes and hatreds"**

I now see that the power of Orwell's novel lies in its unrelenting focus on the last man, Winston Smith – his perspective, powers of observation, survival instincts, dislikes and hatreds. The feel, smell and look of the water backed up in Mrs Parsons' sink; the dried tobacco spilling out of Winston's cheap state-issued Victory cigarettes unless he smoked them above a horizontal level; the jolt in his stomach and the radiating warmth from the cheap gin; the ruinous state of Winston's 39-year-old body; the smooth cream laid paper of the lady's keepsake album in which he wrote his diary; the "faint, sickly smell" of the bluebells that he plucked; and the repulsive rigidity of his wife Katharine's programmed body during their scheduled weekly lovemaking sessions, or as she put it, "making a baby" and performing "our duty to the Party".

Orwell knew these things from his own chosen life: civil war in Catalonia, utter poverty in Paris and London, the primitive cold and damp isolation of the island of Jura where he wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four* while chain-smoking hand-rolled cigarettes. Orwell's own tubercular lungs and ravaged body could model Winston Smith's paroxysms of coughing.

Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* helps us see what has happened now to our society as a whole. For example, as Andrew J. Bacevich describes in *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War*, the American public has come to accept, after the collapse of the Iron Curtain and Operation Desert Storm, a state of perpetually mobilised military force that was not the case at any time during the Cold War. The post-9/11 War on Terror corresponds to Orwell's vision of a small, heroically mythologised army fighting in distant lands forever. To criticise the war here is viewed as an unpatriotic attack against the soldiers themselves.



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The images of soldiers in televised recruitment ads, specially produced music videos and even video games replicate the "master race" aspect of the soldier images that Orwell describes. No one seems to care much about pursuing those who instigated the war in Iraq through lies. Christian churches, where congregations on Sundays used to pray for the peace Jesus Christ promoted, are now filled with prayers in support of our brave soldiers at war.

The US Government itself is not behaving completely like Big Brother. But 24-hour news and cable channels have made it possible for whole communities to stay locked into a single vision of the world as presented, for example, by Rupert Murdoch's Fox News. Many Americans wrongly believe that Barack Obama was not born in the US and is therefore an illegitimate president. Such willed uniformity of belief that defies reality calls to mind Winston Smith's comments, when he contemplates the Newspeak dictionary researcher Syme's fate: "orthodoxy is unconsciousness"; it is "a saving ignorance".

It is hard to read Orwell's novel as *The Last Man in Europe* without feeling like a last human being. One counterforce against ignorant orthodoxy could be education. However, it, too, is now under the control of the same power groups that foster controlled unthinkingness and destruction of human feelings and language.

As Winston Smith takes what he knows to be the fatal step of writing a diary, he is "a lonely ghost uttering a truth that nobody would ever hear. But so long as he uttered it, in some obscure way the continuity was not broken. It was not by making yourself heard, but by staying sane that you carried on the human heritage."

Being human for Smith is being *Homo dicens*. It is an awful irony that his work in the Ministry of Truth destroying history by using language skilfully brings him his "greatest pleasure in life". The most repulsive person Smith encounters is a man with a strident voice from the Fiction Department who speaks nothing but endless Party factoids, or quacking duckspeak as Syme calls it. Smith observes: "This was not a real human being, but some kind of dummy."

We have brought *1984* upon ourselves, by not caring as much about thought and language as George Orwell, and by delinking the intellectual interests that give us pleasure from larger moral concerns.

When Smith remarks that the junk shop bedroom has no telescreen, the old proprietor Mr Charrington replies: "Ah, I never had one of those things. Too expensive. And I never seemed to feel the need of it, somehow." Even if this is a ploy, Smith believes it. He, too, must think we have a choice, and a hand in our own dehumanisation. ●

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