

The Fear Factor

America's war on terror in an Orwellian perspective

After a long period of resistance, a harsh struggle for personal freedom to think and feel, and months of torture in the Ministry of Love, Winston Smith was no longer afraid. "Everything was all right, the struggle was finished. [...] He loved Big Brother."¹

In George Orwell's novel *1984* Winston is a critical citizen of Oceania; geographically comprising the Americas and Great Britain. Theoretically, Orwell's futuristic dystopia of a totalitarian oligarchy, in which the centralized 'Inner Party' headed by Big Brother "uses terror, surveillance, and a repressive bureaucracy to exert power over the individual,"² has not yet materialized. In fact, the democratic multi-party system of the US, seeking to extend global democratic rule, is its polar opposite.

However, in practice, democratic cornerstones are seemingly being eroded. An elite of neoconservative Republicans who are closely affiliated with the Christian right rules the world's largest superpower and present-day policies are increasingly based on the uses of fear, preemptive and continuous warfare against the 'axis of evil' and diminishing civil liberties. Those strategies, which gained momentum several decades ago, frightfully resemble the oligarchic regime presented in *1984*.

Crazy politics of fear

During the Cold War, America's right wing neoconservatives were called "the crazies"³ and included members of the current Bush administration such as Dick Cheney, Donald

¹ Orwell, (1982).

² Kellner (1984).

³ The Observer, 12th September 2004.

Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle. Inspired by political philosopher Leo Strauss, they argued that the American Dream of liberal individualism had torn apart shared values. In order to consolidate America's powerbase and restore national unity, "it was for politicians to assert powerful and inspiring myths [...] one of these was religion; the other was [America's] unique destiny to battle the forces of evil throughout the world."⁴ Because politicians did not have to believe in those myths, it resembles Orwell's *doublethink*: accepting two contradictory lines of reasoning.

One of the 'noble lies' was that Communist regimes like the Soviet Union posed a nuclear threat. Two decades later a new threat was found in 'Al Qaeda'; an alleged global Islamic terrorism network that possesses weapons of mass destruction and allied with Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. However, ignoring and concealing the inconvenient historical fact that the Afghan Mujahedeen guerilla's, with whom Bin Laden cooperated, enjoyed American financial support during the Cold War is "putting history in the dustbin;"⁵ just as Oceania controlled the past, present and future by rewriting reality.

The battle against evil

The tragic September 11 attacks, supposedly funded by Osama Bin Laden, were a trump in the hands of US neoconservatives who now had 'proof' that a terrorist network existed. In just one month after the attacks, the number of organisations listed as 'terrorist' by the US jumped from 18 to 28 and steadily rose to 40 in December 2004.⁶ The battle against evil rematerialized when Bush declared that "as a nation of good folks, we're going to hunt them down [murderers, killers, terrorists, would-be terrorists, cave dwellers, Al Qaeda terrorists], and we're going to find them, and we will bring them to justice."⁷ And thus bombs fell on Afghanistan and Iraq because Bush "just [wants] you to know, that when we talk about war, we're really talking about peace."⁸

⁴ Curtis (2004).

⁵ Solomon (2001).

⁶ US Department of State (2004).

⁷ Dubyaspeak, Quote by Bush, 25th July 2002.

⁸ Quote Bush, 18th June, 2002, <http://www.hud.gov/news/speeches/presremarks.cf>.

Indeed, 'war is peace', as Bush has been nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize for his war on terror, most recently in 2004 by Jan Simonsen, a right-wing Norwegian parliament member, who argued: "Even though they haven't found those weapons [of mass destruction in Iraq], they got rid of a madman and made the world safer."⁹

As Orwell describes, "[war] helps to preserve a special mental atmosphere that a hierarchical society needs [to stay in power and] is now a purely internal affair."¹⁰ Oceania's low profile war with equally powerful Eurasia and Eastasia does not aim at victory nor is it based on ideological differences. The main objective is merely to destroy accumulated wealth in order to retain living standards at a low level. America engages however in asymmetrical and costly confrontations. Since World War II, according to *Rogue State*, the US "seriously intervened into the lives of other nations" in over 60 countries of which approximately 26 were bombed.¹¹ According to critics like John Pilger and Noam Chomsky, all those wars were to some extent aimed at toppling ideologically 'unacceptable' regimes in order to retain and strengthen America's economic powerbase.

Securing freedom

The main strategy deployed to justify the battle against evil is to "[occupy] hearts and minds [...] by fear to create the political will needed to buttress the national security state."¹² Or, as the Bush administration argues: "To be free, we must give freedom up."¹³ Although indoctrination and surveillance by the state is not (yet) as intrusive as Oceania's propagandistic *telescreen* - a device that monitors and influences the behavior and thoughts of individuals -, the US increasingly deploys terror alerts and demonising public relation campaigns, and restricts civil liberties through parliamentary acts like the 2001 US Patriot Act.

⁹ ABC News (2004).

¹⁰ Orwell, (1949).

¹¹ Blum (2000), pp.93-4; pp.126-66.

¹² Swift (2005), pp.9-11.

¹³ Ahmed (2005), pp.14-6.

By critics named the “Big Brother Bill,”¹⁴ the Patriot Act legislates, amongst others, indefinite detention of alleged terrorism suspects, secret home searches without probable reason, government access to personal records, and monitoring of telephone conversations and email correspondence. It is particularly worrisome that the Act does not distinguish between its use for terrorism or ordinary criminal investigations. Especially since it rephrases terrorism as involving any act that “is dangerous to human life”¹⁵ or “appears to [...] influence the policy of a government by intimidation.”¹⁶ Arguably, it could be used to prosecute lobby groups like Greenpeace or anti-globalisation movements. Because “the whole tenor of the debate was ‘let’s grab as much as we can’ given the fear of terrorism”, Democrat Senator Russ Feingold said, he was the only one to vote against the bill.¹⁷

The fear of terrorism is sometimes justified, as September 11, the bombings in Madrid and the hostage drama in Beslan proved. But largely, as argued by Curtis’ documentary *Power of Nightmares*, the threat of terror “has been exaggerated and distorted by politicians.” In fact, America’s intrusive security system and wars against evil create threats rather than resolving them. World-wide the aversion to American foreign policy has grown and contra movements, usually in the form of religious extremism, become more widespread. Also, the new security policies make foreign visits to America more difficult; especially if you happen to carry the same name as a terrorist suspect or if you are a Muslim.

Both instances discourage intercultural exchange and acceptance. What seems to remain for the future is a hermetically closed nation with ignorant citizens who are, just as in *1984*, not permitted to have standards of comparison or perceive the true nature of present-day society. A nation that, without raising questions or being critical, loves the American world as it is.

¹⁴ Socialistworker online (2001).

¹⁵ Rampton and Stauber (2003), p.153.

¹⁶ Socialistworker online (2001).

¹⁷ Ibid.

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