

**Willing Acceptance of Loss of Civil Liberties in Exchange for Perceived Security –  
1984 Revisited and More Relevant Than Ever**  
by Jared Sorin

In 1984, George Orwell offers a compelling warning of governmental pursuit of total power. He drew from historical references, such as the development of communist rule in Russia and the horrors of Nazism. Through vivid analogies to historical events, Orwell accurately depicts people's willingness to accept loss of civil liberties and freedom in response to real or perceived security threats or economic challenges. 1984 remains relevant today, particularly when examined with current world events. Even now, national leaders seek to amass and retain power by capitalizing upon national and international insecurities and fears. In fact, eerie similarities exist between the political landscape in fictitious Oceania and the current political climate in both the United States and Russia. Oceania endured governmental manipulation of hate, war, and economic despair to consolidate power by eliminating democracy and civil liberties. Today, United States and Russian leaders are cynically exploiting the insecurities and vulnerabilities arising from the September 11 attacks in the United States and the plane bombings and school hostage crisis in Russia. As in 1984, these governments seize upon the natural desire of their respective peoples to feel secure by using world events as a pretext to limit freedom and civil liberties in order to consolidate power.

The September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States shook Americans to their core; misimpressions of national security and invincibility dissipated immediately. It appears that American leadership exploited rising fears by whipping up nationalistic fervor to permit a rush to war. In addition, the Bush administration pushed through the enactment of legislation, such as the Patriot Act, that reduces or eliminates long-recognized freedoms. In a 1984-like extension of power, the United States President wiped out years of advancement of civil liberties by eliminating, in certain circumstances, right to counsel, right to speedy trial, and even some privacy rights if a person is merely suspected of aiding or abetting terrorism. He did this under the guise of making America safer, appealing to understandable insecurities. Even more recently than the enactment of the Patriot Act, the angry rhetoric spewed at the Republican National Convention by

Bush devotees clearly demonstrates the depths to which this government will sink to retain power.

George Orwell, by writing 1984, teaches that all nations, even ones with a long tradition of democratic freedoms, are susceptible to governmental desire to increase power with concurrent limitations on civil liberties. President Bush's actions may be compared to the portion of 1984 that reportedly sets forth Goldstein's "The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism," which states:

Every new political theory, by whatever it called itself, led back to hierarchy and regimentation. And in the general hardening of outlook that set in round about 1930, practices which had been long abandoned, in some cases for hundreds of years – imprisonment without trial, the use of war prisoners as slaves, public executions, torture to extract confessions, the use of hostages and the deportation of whole populations – not only became common again, but were tolerated and even defended by people who considered themselves enlightened and progressive. (Orwell, 204)

When read in conjunction with current events, the foregoing excerpt could well have been written today, replacing "1930" with "2001." Perhaps this excerpt of 1984, more than any other, serves to warn all citizens to zealously guard their freedom.

The rightward movement in politics may be less anticipated in the United States than in Russia, which only recently has enjoyed substantial democratic freedoms. Like the United States, however, Russia is the victim of terrorist attacks, including two recent plane bombings and the school hostage crisis in Beslan. Understandably, similar to the American reaction to the September 11 attacks, Russians are wary and feeling increasingly insecure. Just like Oceania's use of the fear of bombs from the enemy, be it Eurasia or Eastasia, to implement totalitarian control, Russian President Putin is misusing terrorist fears to reverse democratic reforms in Russia to consolidate central power. For example, in lieu of democratically elected governors in Russian provinces, Putin has decided to suspend voting rights, opting instead to personally appoint governors. Moreover, he is reversing freedom of speech rights and restricting freedom of the press to eliminate dissent.<sup>1</sup> Putin's actions are analogous to those taken in Oceania, which eliminated free speech and a free press to control thought and speech. Not surprisingly, it

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Hirsh and Frank Brown, "Back to the U.S.S.R.?", Newsweek Magazine, 27 September 2004, 36-38.

has been reported that “[f]or Russians, the quality of their democracy matters less now than their fear of terror” with recent surveys demonstrating the extent to which Russians are willing to forego their freedoms for security.<sup>2</sup>

History is replete with examples of governmental power carried to the extreme of totalitarianism. Observing the merely 30 years prior to publishing 1984, Orwell could point to the governmental abuses of power that led to the excesses of Nazism and communism. These examples, as in 1984, demonstrate how nationalistic fervor may be manipulated by governments to lull citizens into accepting loss of liberty in exchange for a perception of security. Despite the loss of such liberties, the people of Oceania were not made more secure by totalitarianism, any more than were those controlled by Nazism or communism. Likewise, eliminating civil liberties in the United States and Russia will not quell terrorist fears or provide these nations immunity from terrorism. If a reader takes nothing else from George Orwell’s 1984, perhaps its chilling warning of governmental excess and propensity to abuse and consolidate power will encourage active participation in the democratic process and a willingness to guard against acts that diminish freedom in the name of security.

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<sup>2</sup> Hirsh and Brown, 38.