

Notes on Teaching 1984  
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Resources:

NCTE's "1984+20" Project. [www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org). This project came out of a workshop at the 2004 Conference on College Composition and Communication sponsored by Rhetoricians for Peace, a group with a very lively listserve, at [rfp-request@mail.lsit.ucsb.edu](mailto:rfp-request@mail.lsit.ucsb.edu). I can be reached at [dlazere@utk.edu](mailto:dlazere@utk.edu). I use Orwell's 1984 and "Politics and the English Language" in both my composition and literature courses. I think "Politics" should be required reading in first and second term writing courses.

The following passage comes from my forthcoming textbook, *Reading and Writing for Civic Literacy: The Critical Citizen's Guide to Argumentative Rhetoric* (Paradigm Publishers), in a section on psychological, social, and semantic dimensions of argumentation and critical thinking. This chapter deals with psychological blocks like ethnocentrism, authoritarianism and conformity, rationalization, and compartmentalized thinking—the latter two discussed here.

Rationalizations in turn lead us into unconscious inconsistencies and self-contradictions, or compartmentalized thinking. George Orwell's 1984 captured the essence of these mental traps in the concept of doublethink, the term devised by the all-powerful ruling party of the future state of Oceania to describe the mental process through which the masses are programmed into rationalizing all of the party's lies, deprivations of rights, and constant changes of policy or of foreign allies and enemies. Doublethink is brilliantly defined in the section following this chapter, through the thoughts of the central character Winston Smith, a government bureaucrat whose job is rewriting history daily to reconcile it with the shifting party line (when historical records are destroyed, they go "down the memory hole," suggesting that the entire capacity for memory of the past can be destroyed). The slogans summing up the compartmentalized thinking of doublethink in 1984 are emblazoned on the facade of The Ministry of Truth (the agency in charge of producing lies, of course): "WAR IS PEACE. FREEDOM IS SLAVERY. IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH" (19)

In Oceania every military defeat is described in official broadcasts as a stunning victory, every reduction in the standard of living as a "glorious" increase. Yet the people "swallow it" because of a doublethink combination of authoritarian craving to believe that the leaders know best and rationalization of the fear that the government will "track down, denounce, and vaporize" anyone who questions its authority. The citizens are regularly stirred up in a collective "Two Minutes Hate" frenzy against whichever other country the government has identified as the enemy of the moment.

In reading 1984 we are apt to feel grateful that we are living in a free society and not in a totalitarian dictatorship like that of the Soviet Union, the immediate model for Orwell's nightmarish vision. But, in spite of the enormous differences between such dictatorships and American society, our reaction might contain an element of compartmentalized thinking and projection in our denial of the many ways in which we too conform to the power structure of our own society. Are the rationalizations of the shifting alliances in Orwell's world, for example, so different from our government's and media's changing attitudes toward China, Vietnam, and other Communist countries—demonizing them when they were economic rivals, but establishing normal relations with them when they decided to do business with us? The United States was an ally of Saddam Hussein, selling him arms (which he used against his own people), when Iraq was at war with Iran in the 1980s. Michael Moore's film Fahrenheit 9/11 (which alluded directly to 1984 in exposing the alleged rewriting of history by the Bush administration) included newsreel footage from that period showing Donald Rumsfeld, who would later be the Secretary of Defense directing the war against Iraq in 2003, cordially shaking hands with Saddam in Baghdad as an emissary to Iraq in the eighties. Later, in our two wars against Saddam, he was transformed by both Bush presidents and Rumsfeld into a Hitler-like monster (which he may well have been, but no less so in the eighties). We also supported the Taliban and leaders of Al Qaeda when they were resisting the Soviet Union's control of Afghanistan in the eighties; President Reagan praised them as "freedom fighters"—before they turned the weapons that we provided them against us and became "terrorists."

At the time the Bush administration was persuading the public to support its war on Iraq in 2002-2003, a Washington Post poll indicated that 70 percent of Americans believed Iraq played a direct role in 9/11. Another poll found that 44 percent of respondents thought "most" or "some" of the 9/11 hijackers were Iraqi. None were; most were citizens of Saudi Arabia (as was Osama Bin Laden), a country that was a close American ally, with which the Bush family had long-standing ties in the oil business. Fifty-five percent polled believed Saddam Hussein directly

supported Al Qaeda. A majority of Americans also believed that weapons of mass destruction had been located in Iraq and that Saddam was about to build a nuclear bomb. Among regular viewers of Fox News, these percentages were even higher. Several subsequent investigations by Congress and government commissions, however, concluded (at least at the time of this writing) that all of these beliefs were ungrounded. In some cases, the Bush administration denied ever having even made these claims, although critics cited many administration statements implying they were true. Was this perhaps a classic case of Orwellian rationalization, wishful thinking by masses of citizens, terrified by 9/11 and desperately wanting to believe that the war against Iraq was both justified and an effective retaliation against the perpetrators of 9/11? Considering the often hate-filled denunciations of the war's critics (including The Dixie Chicks) as unpatriotic or even treasonous, and heightened government surveillance under the Patriot Act, mightn't some supporters also have been rationalizing their conformity and unwillingness to be tracked down, denounced, and vaporized?

The issue concerning the Iraq War was not what the facts about Saddam Hussein actually were (which at this writing were still open to dispute and new revelations), but whether people's conformity to the government line might have been yet another example of Orwell's depiction of these tendencies in all humans and all societies, particularly under the conditions of mass propaganda in modern democracies as well as dictatorships. Indeed, Orwell objected to the popular reception of 1984 in the West as simply an anti-Communist tract, or as a warning against the totalitarian potential in English socialism ("Ingsoc"): "The name suggested in NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR is of course Ingsoc, but in practice a wide range of choices is open. In the USA the phrase 'Americanism' or 'hundred per cent Americanism' is suitable and the qualifying adjective is as totalitarian as one could wish." (Quoted in Bernard Crick, George Orwell: A Life, 566.)

#### From Goldstein's Book to 9/11

The section on Goldstein's book in 1984 is frequently skimmed over by readers and teachers, but it remains one of the most astute and prophetic analyses of twentieth-century world politics, and especially the Cold War, with some still-vital implications for the twenty-first century.

Goldstein is obviously modeled on Leon Trotsky and his book on Trotsky's "The Revolution Betrayed," which attacks Lenin and especially Stalin for having perverted the ideal of international, democratic socialism into the Soviet Union's "state capitalism," a mirror image of Western elite rule, nationalism, and imperialism. Goldstein's book also presents a definitive analysis of totalitarian society and modern war.

It begins on p. 152 in the Signet edition. The initial picture of a world divided among three superpowers is developed on 153: "In one combination or another, these three superstates are permanently at war . . . . It is a warfare of limited aims between combatants who are unable to destroy one another, have no material cause for fighting, and are not divided by any genuine ideological difference."

There are two main motives for this permanent war: The first, explained on 154-55, is an eerily prescient account of superpower rivalries to control economic globalization in Third World countries, which are coveted partly for their natural resources, "but above all they contain a bottomless reserve of cheap labor. Whichever power controls equatorial Africa, or the countries of the Middle East, or Southern India, or the Indonesian Archipelago, disposes also of the bodies of scores of hundreds of millions of ill-paid and hard-working coolies." (Orwell's analysis here needs to be adjusted to account for the rise of multinational corporations and the extent to which they have superseded nation-state rivalries.)

The second motive is explained beginning on 155: "The primary aim of modern warfare (in accordance with the principles of *doublethink*, this aim is simultaneously recognized and not recognized by the directing brains of the Inner Party) is to use up the products of the machine without raising the general standard of living." Modern industry has created the capacity for enormous, universal increases in the standard of living, health, and education. "But in practice such a society could not long remain stable. For if leisure and security were enjoyed by all alike, the great mass of human beings who are normally stupefied by poverty would become literate and would learn to think for themselves; and when once they had done this, they would sooner or later realize that the privileged minority had no function, and they would sweep it away" (157).

So, "the essential act of war is destruction, not necessarily of human lives, but of the products of human labor. War is a way of shattering to pieces, or pouring into the stratosphere, or sinking in the depths of the sea, materials which

might otherwise be used to make the masses too comfortable, and hence, in the long run, too intelligent. Even when weapons of war are not actually destroyed, their manufacture is still a convenient way of expending labor power without producing anything that can be consumed” (157).

The acceptance of this “permanent war economy” by the masses is achieved through modern propaganda demonizing whoever the chosen foreign enemy of the moment, among the three superpowers, may be. “The citizen of Oceania is not allowed to know anything of the tenets of the other two philosophies, but he is taught to execrate them as barbarous outrages upon morality and common sense. Actually the three philosophies are barely distinguishable, and the social systems which they support are not distinguishable at all. Everywhere there is the same pyramidal structure, the same worship of a semi-divine leader, the same economy existing by and for continuous warfare. It follows that the three superstates not only cannot conquer one another, but would gain no advantage by doing so. On the contrary, so long as they remain in conflict they prop one another up, like three sheaves of corn” (162).

The bottom line is that, in contrast to past wars in which the ruling groups in one country really did fight against one another, in the world of 1984, “The war is waged by each ruling group against its own subjects, and the object of the war is not to make or prevent conquests of territory, but to keep the structure of society intact” (164).

Now, as I said earlier, Goldstein’s book presents a frighteningly compelling explanation for the Cold War, economic globalization, and the American permanent war economy in which perpetually escalating military spending is the tail that wags the dog of national spending priorities. However, it does not appear adequate at all to explain the more recent, so-called “clash of civilizations” between the West and Islam, in which 9/11 was a central event. So I propose that among the activities of our “1984” project, we should address the question of whether or how Orwell’s analysis can be reconciled with Arab-Islamic antagonism toward the West. Is this antagonism the expression of some mutation of aborted Third World Revolution? To what extent do nationalistic Arab rulers or figures like Osama bin Laden stand in the same relationship to their own people as the rulers of the superpowers Orwell described? In short, can Orwell’s view of geopolitics be updated for our age, and if so, how?