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PROLOGUE

Donald and Winston at the Ministry of Alternative Facts

Big Brother, Welcome to Broadway!

It was a bright cold day in January, and the keyboards were clicking \$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$.¹ In a deliciously fitting historical irony, the first full day in office of the new American president, Donald Trump, commenced on January 21, 2017—the sixty-seventh anniversary of George Orwell’s death—just as Orwell’s grim novel of a dystopian future, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, began its ascent once again to No. 1 on the best seller lists.

Such is Clio’s caprice.

In hindsight, the Orwellian countdown to Inauguration Day started even before Election Day on November 8. Trump’s startling victory triggered an unexpected explosion of popular interest in the novel, however, as sales of the Signet paperback edition jumped tenfold in the next six weeks. On the eve of the inauguration, the book hovered between No. 5 and No. 7 on the Amazon.com best seller list. Following the inauguration, a series of controversial public statements by senior officials in the new administration catapulted it to No. 2. And by the morning of January 25, it stood at No. 1.²

Fast-forward six months: Welcome, Big Brother, to Broadway!

Opening on June 22 as the first major entry of the 2017–18 Broadway season, a British production of *1984* was staged at the newly refurbished Hudson Theater. Jointly arranged by London

producer Sonia Friedman and New York producer Scott Rudin, this stage version had been mounted in London in 2013–14 and has most recently starred Andrew Gower as Winston Smith. Co-created by writer-directors Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan, *1984* had toured to sold-out houses—and rave reviews—throughout England. The production had featured a giant video wall from which Big Brother looked down on his party members to make sure no one was committing “thoughtcrimes.” Critics hailed the lighting, sound, and video design as a provocative assault on the mind and senses—like a trip to Room 101—and compared the production to movies by Stanley Kubrick and David Lynch. The London production was performed for a few regional American audiences in 2016, most notably at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and at the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington D.C. The Broadway show featured an all-American cast.

The Broadway staging of *1984* succeeded months-long efforts to satirize and protest the policies of Trump and his administration. For example, on April 4—the date on which the fateful events that open Orwell’s novel occur—a Hollywood-based political advocacy group (dubbing itself the United States of Cinema) arranged the return screening of Michael Radford’s film adaptation in American theaters. Originally released in 1984 and starring John Hurt as Winston and Richard Burton as O’Brien—in Sir Richard’s last film appearance before his death—160 art house movie theaters across the country in 148 cities and 42 states (plus five locations in Canada and one in England) screened *1984* as part of a larger political campaign against the decision by the Trump administration to cut funding from artist grant programs, including the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

The Oprah of the Oval Office, or *Doubleplusgood* Dystopianism?

How did all this come to be? Several related news events that exemplified what has come to be known as the “post-factual world” account for the meteoric rise and final breakthrough of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to the top of the best seller lists in January 2017. Within hours of Trump’s swearing in, White House press secretary Sean Spicer heatedly insisted that the inauguration had been the best attended ever—“period”—regardless of what the photo and statistical evidence might indicate. Two days later, on the Sunday morning television show *Meet the Press*, Kellyanne Conway, a close advisor to the president, defended Spicer by “explaining” that his false claims were merely “alternative facts.” Alarms rang out across the globe that Winston Smith could not have come up with a better line in his cubicle at the Ministry of Truth, where all fabrications are merely what could be termed “alternative facts.” Within minutes of the novel’s historic reconquest of first place on the best seller list—as had already happened during September 1983 to April 1984, 34 years after its original publication in June 1949—staffers from news organizations such as CNN and PBS were in touch with me for comments about “what Orwell would say.”

I dubbed Conway, whose inadvertent masterstroke of euphemistic Newspeak suddenly made her the darling of the publishing industry, the “Oprah of the Oval Office,” a wonder woman who could immediately turn serious books (above all, dystopian classics) into best sellers, even if they had been selling poorly (or had been out of print) for years. Her notorious phrase immediately went viral and was translated into numerous languages.³ Not that the Fourth Estate abuses language any less than does the administration—or is any more unlikely to be ignorant of the

English language. After my own interview with PBS, I read the following sentence in its published report on the Amazon best seller story: “Born in 1903, Orwell lived through two world wars and saw the rise of totalitarian regimes on an unpresided [sic!] scale.” (Unfortunately—yet predictably—this was not deliberate irony, as I later ascertained.)

Signet regarded the entire development as “doubleplusgood.” Its edition of the novel soared even higher in the two months following the inauguration, enjoying a 10,000 percent increase in sales, whereupon the publisher immediately announced a new print run of 100,000 copies, including an additional 25,000 of *Animal Farm*. In Britain, sales of the Penguin edition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which had been selling approximately 5,000 copies per week in the run-up to January 20, multiplied following the January news events, inducing Penguin to print 75,000 more copies immediately. Random House also printed an extra 175,000 copies of the novel based on sales forecasts.

Obviously, the sales of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have risen in response to Trump’s audacious attempts to manipulate facts throughout his long presidential campaign and since his November 2016 election victory. His tall tales grew, if anything, even more Bunyanesque during his first week in office. For instance, besides outlandish claims of mass voter fraud and his contention that he had lost the popular vote in the November election because 3 million votes had been cast “illegally,” Trump maintained that the science behind climate change is a hoax perpetrated by the Chinese.

In his personal manifesto, *The Art of the Deal* (1987)—which some critics regard as a self-revealing statement of his life philosophy à la Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*—Trump discusses his style of “bravado” and penchant for “truthful hyperbole,” which he considers “an innocent form of exaggeration—and a very effective form of

promotion.” Unsurprisingly, among the other postelection best sellers on Amazon.com was Trump’s *The Art of the Deal*. By late January, it had consistently secured a place in the top 15.

Sanity Is Statistical—Not?

It is interesting that the connection between “alternative facts” and Orwell’s dystopia was first made by a reporter who dubbed it “a George Orwell phrase”—as if Orwell himself might have been a Winston Smith who crafted his lies in clever-sounding language or even a version of Donald Trump. As I hope to show in the succeeding chapters, this confusion about and conflation of the author George Orwell with such “Orwellian” locutions is a common occurrence. Is “Orwellian” language the limpid, direct style of the author? Or is it the diabolical doublespeak of Big Brother? Certainly in the public mind—and in common usage—that proper adjective mainly signifies the latter. And this sinister meaning of the man’s name in adjectival form reflects the rise of what can be called the “Orwell legend,” that is, the development of an individual into an icon. I discuss throughout the book the difference between Orwell and “Orwell,” with the latter representing the towering totem invoked by ideologically motivated (or ill-informed and careless) observers to bolster whatever arguments they seek to advance.⁴

Scandals galore and internecine warfare notwithstanding, Trump has proven a master at dominating the airwaves. It is as if he based his entire campaign strategy and governing outlook on the famous party slogan in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: “Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.” The point is this: whoever controls the present controls both the past *and* the future. Such a tremendous power to command

headlines and dictate the public conversation of the moment—exemplified by his direct connection to the wider public via his ever-active Twitter account⁵—is a terrifying demonstration of what Orwell termed the “mutability of the past.” The phrase refers to the so-called rectification of history by *Minitru* bureaucrats such as Winston Smith, whereby facts are indeed “mutable,” that is, all kinds of “alternative facts” can be invented that allow various scenarios to be accepted as reality. After all, Winston Smith is brainwashed in Room 101 to believe that $2 + 2 = 5$. His efforts to maintain that “sanity is not statistical” fail utterly, leading to the novel’s final line of despair: “He loved Big Brother.”

Yet one caveat is necessary. The rise of the Internet and sound bite infotainment industry in our ADD culture make the kind of activity that Winston performs in the Ministry of Truth unnecessary. There is no need for the Trump administration to rewrite already published articles to make them retroactively match some new alternative reality or draft backdated articles about these sham events; it just needs to repeat its “alternative facts” incessantly so that they dominate the airwaves and people accept these mutable “facts” in the way that Julia in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* simply accepts that Oceania had “always been at war with Eurasia”—or was it Eastasia? Newscasters have no more command over Old-speak precepts than does the president himself. In the age of endless spin and limitless cyberspace—not to mention avatars and Internet addiction—the lines between virtual reality and “objective truth” (a concept cherished by George Orwell) fade and blur into $2 + 2 =$.⁶

Of course, none of this obfuscation of language or “rectification” of history is new (or “unpresided”) with Donald Trump or with a Republican administration. Trump’s predecessor, Barack Obama, was the only president in history to have officially been at war for every single day of his eight years in the White House—



FIGURE 2. Calls to “impeach Big Brother” did not begin with Donald Trump and the aftermath of the 2018 midterm elections in the U.S., which witnessed control of the House of Representatives shift to the Democrats and the start of congressional investigations to impeach him. “Big Brother” Ronald Reagan also witnessed scattered calls for impeachment from his political opponents, as Ziggy learns in this February 1982 cartoon. (Attempts to impeach Reagan never gained strong congressional support. In 1999, however, the case turned out quite differently for Democratic president Bill Clinton, who was impeached by a Republican-led House in December 1998, though not convicted by the U.S. Senate two months later.)

and let us not forget that he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize after only eight months in the White House, the only political leader ever to win it during his very first year in office. “War Is Peace,” anyone? President Bill Clinton too was adept at denying objective truths and proclaiming “alternative facts,” famously insisting that the truth of his testimony under oath regarding his affair with “that woman” (Monica Lewinsky) was fully understandable if one grasped “what the meaning of the word ‘is’ is.”

How’s that for a “George Orwell [*sic*] phrase”?

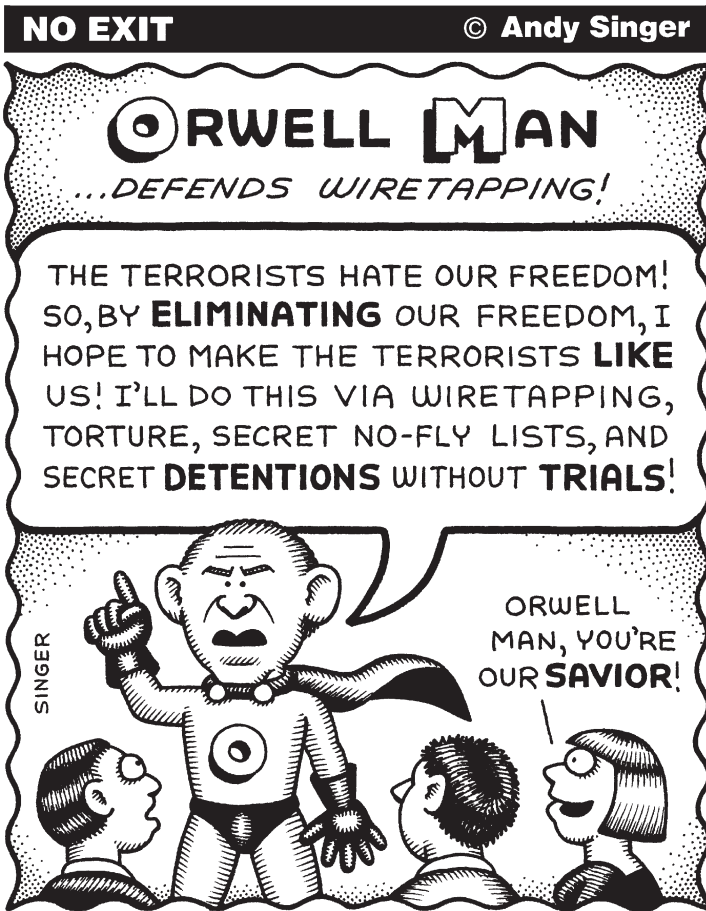


FIGURE 3. Orwell Man? Or “Orwell” Man?

George W. Bush is depicted here as an “Orwellian” tyrant, the Big Brotherish autocrat who not only defends wiretapping but also—through a virtuoso feat of doublethink and doublespeak—demonstrates that freedom is slavery. His logic? If “terrorists” hate America, the Land of the Free, then the only logical solution for all (double)thinking people is to abolish all freedoms through wiretapping, waterboarding, and other security “measures.”

This cartoon appeared in April 2006, as the quagmire of the American occupation of Iraq was deepening.

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