

2019

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Recommended Citation

McKay, Ivy (2019) "Donald Trump and Doublespeak: An Unsettling Precursor to the Dystopian Society of George Orwell's 1984," *The Pegasus Review: UCF Undergraduate Research Journal (URJ)*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/urj/vol10/iss1/3>



Donald Trump and Doublespeak: An Unsettling Precursor to the Dystopian Society of George Orwell's *1984*

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ABSTRACT: This paper analyses Donald Trump's 2016 Presidential campaign alongside George Orwell's *1984*. I analyze specific social elements, including the rhetoric of Trump's supporters, the idea of post-truth, and power, and I exemplify how Trump's campaign and the government in Orwell's novel (the Party) share several commonalities. Trump's self-contradictory speaking and the use of Doublespeak in *1984* is one of the similarities between the fiction of Orwell's text and the reality of our lived experience. Furthermore, the paper discusses the possible effects of this Orwellian Party-like administration. In the final analysis, I conclude that George Orwell's vision of a dystopian future sheds light on Donald Trump's behavior and actions throughout the 2016 campaign.

KEYWORDS: Presidential Election, politics, Donald Trump, Dystopian, Doublespeak

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As an election year, 2016 was anticipated to be politically chaotic for the United States due to the contentiousness of the presidential candidates. Now, many Americans are questioning whether the country's democratic system will withstand President Donald Trump's first term in office. The hardly-qualified candidate gained a surprising number of predominantly social conservative followers during his campaign. With his promise to "Make America Great Again," Trump convinced his supporters that change would be imminent. At the same time, Trump's promises and grandiose statements are the exact reason why many Americans do not support him. Since the beginning of the election, Trump spoke thoughtlessly on several hot-button topics. When his controversial statements were questioned, he denied ever making them. By way of example, a video released on the Huffington Post's Facebook page provides evidence of Trump's "flip-flopping."¹ The video depicts a montage of one quote after another exemplifying his deceptive and asinine behavior. He states a claim in one clip and then denies it entirely in another. This denial is a form of doublespeak, a tactic also used in George Orwell's *1984*, and can be defined as "language used to deceive usually through concealment or misrepresentation of truth" (Meriam-Webster). The use of doublespeak in the political realm allows politicians to word policies and statements such that they appeal to different segments of the public. Trump uses doublespeak to gain unwavering support and control over his devotees. Trump's blatant disregard for the truth makes way for the possibility of unchecked power. As a result, I argue Trump's use of doublespeak, desire for absolute control, and disregard for the truth can be seen as a precursor to the totalitarian government as depicted in George Orwell's *1984*.

The dystopian classic *1984* follows its protagonist Winston through his day-to-day routines as a lower Party member of the governing body of Oceania, formerly Great Britain. Oceania is a hierarchical government that consists of Big Brother, Inner Party, Outer Party, and the Proles. Big Brother serves as the nebulous figure-head and pinnacle of power for the totalitarian government. Through the use of technology, the Party monitors everything from Winston's location to his thoughts, especially his attitudes regarding the Party. In a society plagued by constant war (real or manufactured), the loyalty of citizens to their government is crucial for control. The Party's absolute power results in constant fear and an unquestioning, if not an unthinking, population. Oceania's enemies vary,

but the Party ceases to acknowledge that there has been a shift in both enemies and allies—the official narrative is amended to show that the enemy has always been the enemy, and the ally has always been the ally. Winston, however, sees these discrepancies in his job as a revisionist historian who maintains the Party's desired narrative. In his work, Winston focuses on language, which he manipulates to maintain the Party's hold on power. Through constant surveillance and the regulation of language, the totalitarian government controls the thoughts and behavior of its citizens. As I explain below, the Party's desire for control is mirrored in Trump's 2016 campaign and his administration.

TRUMP SUPPORTERS/ILLUSIONS

Relying on his success as a TV personality, Trump uses colorful catch phrases to grab voter's attention and to sway them in his direction. Despite Trump's lack of political experience and wide array of disrespectful comments regarding almost every minority group, his campaign struck a chord with several million Americans. In "Why I Voted for Donald Trump," journalist Edward Helmore asked six North Carolinians of varying race, gender, and age why their vote went to Trump. Their answers include a lot of the vapid narrative used by Trump himself, including, "I think he's going to shake things up" and "I like Trump's business sense" (Helmore). But perhaps the most startling rationale for Trump's appeal was, "You don't have to be a politician to be a president, you just have to know how to better yourself" (Helmore). Until this election, this statement had been false: presidents have been politicians, maintaining some element of political decorum. But when it comes to Trump and his supporters, the question of true or false is neither essential nor relevant. "[Trump] tells lies that are seemingly random, frequently inconsistent, and often plainly ridiculous" (Resnikoff). It is important to note here that four out of the six interviewees responded from an emotional standpoint; they discussed how Trump made them feel. This emotional perspective is pertinent information that I will discuss later.

Voters' support for Trump, even when explained, still confuses many. One wonders how a candidate who "flip-flops a lot" could continue to appeal to the American public (Helmore). The reasoning for this phenomenon may lie in an excerpt from Hitler's infamous tract *Mein Kampf*, as cited in Terence Morgan's "Public

¹<https://www.facebook.com/HuffingtonPost/videos/10154337784426130/>

Doublespeak: *1984* and Beyond”: “The masses, however, are slow-moving, and they always require an interval of time before they are prepared to notice anything at all, and they will ultimately remember only the simplest idea repeated a thousand times over” (Morgan 227). This simple idea closely resembles Trump’s campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again.” A simple phrase with promise, but no substance. To make America great again would mean different things to different people. The slogan does not give answers to why or how; it simply answers what, and Trump supporters are satisfied with this simplistic narrative. Simply hearing that he promises to take the country back to the “good ole days” was enough to win many of their votes. The combination of the American voter’s desire for change, Trump’s nostalgic narrative, and his lack of political experience allowed him to successfully emerge from a normative group of presidential candidates.

In Terence Morgan’s article, the dangers of the attitudes of Trump supporters can be compared to a scientific experiment involving rats. In the experiment, scientists split a group of food-deprived rats into two groups. One group was then fed a mixture of sugar and water, while the other was fed a mixture of saccharine and water. Both groups behaved as though they were full and nourished, but the rats fed with saccharine died of malnutrition, “all the while behaving as though their hunger was satisfied” (Morgan 224). The saccharine-fed rats resemble Trump supporters; they are satisfied by false claims that they believe to be true.² “Like the saccharine environment, an environment created by or infiltrated by doublespeak... provides the appearance of nourishment and the promise of survival, but the appearance is illusionary and the promise false” (Morgan 224). As evidenced by the Huffington Post video, there is proof that Trump employs doublespeak. What “provides nourishment” is the denial of a statement that was, in fact, stated. Nevertheless, this nourishment is false because the denial is a lie and yet Trump’s supporters remain satisfied.

The saccharine experiment is paralleled in *1984*. During his lunch hour, Winston describes the standard lunch that contains an assortment of bland, unenticing morsels. Most importantly, the lunch includes a saccharine tablet (Orwell 50). Winston then reflects on the cafeteria around him, from the grimy walls, to the food on his plate, “Always in your stomach and in your skin there

was a sort of protest, a feeling that you had been cheated of something that you had the right to” (59). The Party, like the scientists in the saccharine experiment, gives the illusion of nourishment, but these meals lack any true nourishment or sustenance. Similarly, Trump’s denial gives the illusion of a promise, but because the denial is false, it, too, is not sustainable—this is the precursory element of my argument. If Trump supporters accept false claims now, this behavior will likely continue in the future. If this illusory satisfaction is allowed to spread, Trump supporters will be no different from Orwell’s Party members. They will accept any claim stated by the Trump administration because they have been led to believe—either through self-deception or through confirmation bias—that blind acceptance is the only option.

The Party in *1984* governs and controls its members through its three slogans: War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, and Ignorance is Strength (Orwell 4). Ignorance is strength best relates to the Trump administration. This slogan is explained in *the book*, a propaganda-filled text explaining the logic behind the Party and its governing policies. Here, it becomes apparent that, like Trump supporters, Party members are expected to ignore truth or facts in favor of the official narrative. The Party’s concept of *black-white* exemplifies this idea:

Applied to an opponent, it means the habit of imprudently claiming that black is white, in contradiction to the plain facts. Applied to a party member, it means a loyal willingness to say that black is white when Party discipline demands this. But it means also the ability to *believe* that black is white, and more, to know that black is white, and to forget that one has ever believed the contrary (Orwell 212).

Even when it is a known fact that black is not white, Party members must know that black is white. This example embodies the concept of doublethink³: Facts are blatantly denied despite the evidence for them. Doublethink allows ignorance to strengthen the Party, and weaken its members.

The ignorance exemplified in *1984* provides a backdrop for our current political moment, in which facts are losing merit due to Trump’s outlandish and sophomoric behavior. Max Greenwood outlines this phenomenon in “Trump’s Lies Aren’t Lies.” According to Scottie Nell

² I.e. Trump’s denial of past statements.

³ For the purpose of this argument, doublethink and doublespeak are treated synonymously.

Hughes, a faithful supporter, “Everybody has a way of interpreting [facts] to be the truth or not true. There’s no such thing, unfortunately, anymore as facts” (Greenwood). In short, the fact is facts are true. Hughes’ willingness to not only deny facts, but to claim that facts themselves are not fundamentally true, creates a new perspective of reality in which ignorance is becoming more widely accepted. By allowing ignorance to continue, we could potentially be at a starting point leading to totalitarianism as described in *1984*. Hughes’ quote above essentially paraphrases the Party’s standpoint of fact, “there is need for an unwearying, moment-to-moment flexibility in the treatment of facts” (Orwell 212). This flexibility furthers the similarities between the ideas of the Party and those of Trump and his supporters.

POST-TRUTH/REALITY

The term doublespeak was not coined by Orwell, nor is it used in his novel; it is, however, often associated with *1984* due to the term’s similarities to the novel’s own term, doublethink (Philips). Nevertheless, the year 2016 had a similar term. In Erin Keane’s essay “From Truthiness to Post-Truth, Just in Time for Donald Trump,” Post-truth is defined as “...a state in which ‘objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’” (Keane). While doublespeak and post-truth are not identical, they are both used to obfuscate and manipulate the truth. This idea that feelings are more credible than facts was one of the main tactics used during the 2016 Republican National Convention (RNC). John Oliver, the host of *Last Week Tonight*, covered many of the speaker’s statements, including those of Newt Gingrich. When presented with the fact that America’s crime rate is down, Gingrich replied “That’s your view, but what I said is also a fact” (Oliver). However, what he “also said” was “The average American...does not think crime is down, [and] does not think they are safer” (Oliver). Thinking something is true does not prove that it is true. Not only has Gingrich relabeled factual statistics as views; he also believes that merely thinking something is true and the actual truth are interchangeable. This post-truth narrative only expanded as the election wore on and continues today with President Trump’s discourse from the presidential bully-pulpit. The President denies past claims, and his supporters are comfortable with

these false denials. These instances of doublespeak will produce a vicious cycle allowing for more doublespeak in the years to come.

The footage from the RNC proves that Trump is not the only one denying truth. His endorsers, campaign managers, and even some unassociated reporters engaged in this behavior during the campaign. This behavior has escalated from denying statements to denying actions. As recalled in “Trump’s Lies Have a Purpose,” reporter Ben Terris witnessed Trump’s campaign manager, Corey Lewandowski, assault a reporter (Resnikoff). The campaign claimed that this altercation had never happened, and after continuous pressure from the campaign manager, “Terris began to doubt what he had seen” (Resnikoff). Terris’s uncertainty exemplifies the malleability of the human mind and its ability to be swayed by suggestions from individuals with power and perceived credibility. Simply because those in power claimed the assault had not occurred, an eye-witness questioned his own senses. Likewise, the actions taken by the Trump campaign are the same ones in which the Party engages: “The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears” (Orwell 81). This statement exemplifies the danger than can arise from unchallenged political power. Those who wield it are able to “... [frighten] you out of your beliefs, persuading you, to deny the evidence of your senses” (80). Although *1984* is set thirty-four years in the past, the caliber of totalitarianism displayed could be in America’s future.⁴

POWER

The similarities between the Trump campaign and the Party in *1984* are further exemplified in how the two communicate with their supporters. Each of the controlling powers has benefited from technology to facilitate communication. Ned Resnikoff describes Trump’s significance in the public eye as a “constant media focus” that allowed him to “bombard the airwaves with an unending stream of surreal falsehoods” (Resnikoff). No matter which news network Americans watch in their homes, Trump was constantly and continues to be a topic of conversation. Whether it was speeches or scandals, his face was the one voters saw more often than any other candidate. The Party in *1984* takes this focus one step further by watching its members at all times.

⁴There are many models of propaganda. The Orwellian use of propaganda and totalitarian governance relies on the use of fear that closely embodies our society. As Christopher Hitchens writes, Orwell “seemed to strain credulity because he posited a regime that would go to any lengths to own and possess history, to rewrite and construct it, and to inculcate it by means of coercion” (37).

Through the advancement of technology, the Party has installed telescreens in every home, office, hallway, and anywhere else members may go. These devices allow the Party to both surveil and control its citizens.⁵ According to the Party's official book, "The possibility of enforcing not only complete obedience to the will of the State, but complete uniformity of opinion on all subjects, now existed for the first time" (Orwell 206). Gilles Deleuze addresses the use of technology in "Postscript on the Societies of Control" stating, "the societies of control operate with machines of a third type, computers, whose passive danger is jamming and whose active one is piracy and the introduction of viruses" (6). These computers are the telescreens and the viruses are the controls the Party uses to infect the ideas of those subject to Big Brother. Ultimately, complete control is the goal of those in power. This control is possible because of the concept of sender-to-sender communication. This idea is discussed in Morgan's "Public Doublespeak: 1984 and Beyond." He writes, "Control tends to remain with the sender in a non-sharing experience with power held by the message sender..." (224). This one-way communication method is carried out in our society through Trump's takeover of television (as well as social media), and in 1984 through the telescreens. While the telescreens allow the Party to both surveil and control its members, Trump's method only allows for control of viewers through his statements and denials. Both instances, however, allow the powerful to make their claims without questions or feedback from their audience, making the voice of power the only one heard.

The control carried out by the Party in 1984 is exactly what scholar Saul Newman writes about in *Politics of Postanarchism*. Newman emphasizes the fact that power is inevitable, but dominant power is not, "What we must watch out for is the risk of domination emerging, something that is always possible due to the instability and uncertainty of power relations" (63). The domination of the Party allows for control of not only the citizen's opinions, but their realities as well in 1984. *The book* admits to control over reality, "...since the Party is in full control of all records, and in equally full control of the minds of its members, it follows that the past is whatever the Party chooses to make it" (Orwell 213). Through domination, those in power change past events

by utilizing doublespeak, "In Oldspeak it is called, quite frankly, 'reality control.' In Newspeak it is called doublethink..." (Orwell 214). The past is a reality that a dominant power can control simply by ignoring it. For example, Winston notes that Oceania is currently at war with Eurasia and allied with Eastasia (Orwell 34). He then reflects that Eastasia was the enemy and Eurasia was the ally four years ago (34). The Party never addresses this switch: "In no public or private utterance was it ever admitted that the three powers had at any time been grouped along different lines" (34). Through the Party members' blind acceptance of this switch of ally and enemy, the dominance and control continue. In fact, Winston is only able to remember this switch because "his memory was not satisfactorily under control" (34). Again, 1984 serves as a precursory element to our current political moment. Like Party members, Trump's voters allowed the acceptance of false claims to proliferate and therefore lead to the success of power-hungry and dominating politicians. The damage is, if context proving Trump engages in doublespeak were to disappear from the dominant narrative as his Presidential term proceeds, it would become easier for him to dominate the masses and dispel dissent.⁶

The reason as to why Oceania is constantly at war is never explained to Party members, which brings into focus the Party's ambiguity. This flexible way of governing is similar to that of contemporary Russia. In Resnikoff's "Trump's Lies Have a Purpose," Vladislav Surkov, one of Vladimir Putin's main advisors, discusses his methods of control. Journalist Adam Curtis notes, "[Surkov's] aim is to undermine the people's perception of the world, so they never know what is really happening" (Resnikoff). Similarly, the Party member's reality is solely based on what the Party tells them. Because of this control, they undermine what citizens understand. War is a part of everyday life; it is constant, though the enemy is not. What is unsettling about this behavior is that Trump and his former chief executive officer, Steve Bannon, want to emulate this control Russia has over its citizens (Resnikoff). What if Americans, too, become unsure of reality in the near future as well?

Another aspect of the Party's ambiguity is the lack of a specific identity. While there is the "black mustachio'd

⁵ There is a link here with Foucault and the panopticon as discussed in *Discipline and Punish*. However, I am choosing to use Deleuze's concept of control and Newman's idea of domination as discussed below.

⁶ Content is currently available in other venues. However, with the overturn of Net Neutrality, information will be controlled by corporations. Therefore, informational content will be policed by those in power, which could result in controversial content becoming less accessible to the public.

face” of Big Brother, the Party’s symbolic leader, there is not one particular civilian who leads the Party and its members (Orwell 2). This lack of a specific figurehead is intentional. As stated in *the book*, “*Who* wields power is not important, provided that the hierarchical structure remains always the same” (210). The Party is not concerned whether a specific person is in power, as long as the Party itself is obeyed without question. For his part, Bannon believes in an increasing distance between the governors and the governed. In an interview cited in Resnikoff’s article, Bannon states, “It only helps us when [the media] get it wrong” (Resnikoff). It works to the administration’s advantage “when [the population is] blind to who we are and what we’re doing” (Resnikoff). Bannon likes the idea of keeping Americans in the dark, as one of the key components to his strategy is “darkness” (Resnikoff). This “darkness” allows him and his fellow cabinet members to decide on policies that affect Americans without having to answer to the people.

Unilateral decisions like this only feed the post-truth narrative and the totalitarian power emerging in the United States. When those in power are no longer accessible to the public, the divide allows for unfair treatment of the dominated group. This divide is exemplified in *1984* through the hierarchy of Big Brother, Inner Party, Outer Party, and the Proles (Orwell 208). The Inner Party members enjoy luxuries like wine, while the Proles scrounge for scraps of food on the street. Americans must stay informed about who holds power in Washington so that humanity is not segmented into categories that decide one’s worth in society based on the desires of the dominant power. If we allow Trump to continue to behave as he has throughout the presidential election and his first two years in office, we are surely on the path to living in a society similar to the one described in *1984*.

CONCLUSION

Although it arrived thirty-four years late, George Orwell’s vision began to come to life during the United States’ 2016 Presidential election and has continued to develop during the tenure of Donald Trump’s presidency. While there were several warning signs regarding the Republican candidate, such signs were overlooked by his voters. Trump made his supporters feel as if he was the best candidate, but one of the most obvious facts about his campaign is that he is simply not qualified. Having never engaged with politics before, his campaign was quite shocking, but his transition from candidate to President

was even more so. Throughout the election, Trump became known for saying one thing and then denying ever saying it. Trump’s denial brought doublespeak into the election and the nation’s narrative like never before. His ability to blatantly lie to voters but still win an election is reminiscent of the power held by the Party in George Orwell’s *1984*. The denial of past statements is accepted by Trump supporters, just as the word of the Party is accepted without question by Party members. While many are questioning Trump’s statements now, this resistance could diminish as his Presidential term proceeds, converting America’s esteemed democracy into a totalitarian government saturated in post-truth. The actions of Trump’s administration are unsettlingly similar to that of the Party. False promises are proving satisfactory, facts are discounted due to feelings, and power-hungry politicians plan to keep their strategies private from citizens. These precursory signs of totalitarianism are no longer theory. The reality is that they are being played out. Therefore, if the government seeks unchecked power, it is up to Americans to stop it. Just as Winston said, “If there is hope, ...it lies in the proles” (Orwell 82). It is up to those who can see through Trump’s doublespeak to arrest this progression of dominant power. Only if power is checked can we attain equality, equity, and freedom for all.

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