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### George Orwell's Neglected Prophecy

When it was published 40 years ago, George Orwell's *1984* was hailed as a major prophetic work. It still is. When the year 1984 finally arrived, many of us felt a bit relieved that things hadn't yet turned out as badly as Orwell had predicted: not in Canada, anyway. And since the West had immediately and triumphantly assumed that the society portrayed in *1984*—as in *Animal Farm* a little earlier—was modeled on that of the Soviet Union, it now seemed that with freedom bustin' out all over, Orwell might prove to have been too gloomy a prophet.

Orwell's prophecy, however, deals with much more than the character of government and the quality of life in 1984. He was fundamentally concerned with another issue, unsuited to the purposes of Western self-congratulation. For the stability of the horridly repressive governmental arrangements portrayed in *1984* depends upon a tacit but reliable commitment of the three superpowers to accept one another's hegemony over its own client-states. In its internal propaganda each continues to portray the others as menacing enough to justify severe internal repression and a miserable standard of living as the price of national security. But the threat of war has become unreal: a fantasy in which Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia collaborate to keep their own subjects under control.

That aspect of his prophecy may indeed be coming to pass, albeit unevenly. The Soviet Union relinquishes Nicaragua and, implicitly, Cuba to American *de facto* domination. The United States avoids a provocative response to independence movements within the Soviet Union, though it continues to support counter-revolutionary insurgents in Angola and—in violation of the agreement under which the Soviet Union withdrew its forces—in Afghanistan.

This process of mutual accommodation is still in a very early stage, and will require much more mutual trust among the superpowers than

now exists. But its development is highly probable for exactly the reasons Orwell suggests. Only in this way can the elites of the superpowers and their satrapies maintain their hegemony while preserving enough scarce resources from the ravages of warfare to make that hegemony profitable.

The chief obstacle to progress toward mutual accommodation among the superpowers is the threat such accommodation poses to the dominance of military and economic elites, whose acquiescence must first be gained if social change is to proceed without major violence. *1984* describes in lurid detail how effectively political leaders may defend themselves against the perils of peace.

At the moment, the Chinese authorities refuse reforms; conservative Communists in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union oppose them, and the American military-industrial complex stalls, appalled at the prospect of a "peace dividend" and the political power that goes with it being squandered on public welfare. This has long been the worst nightmare of American policy, which propagates its devotion to a profit-based economy with a terrorist sophistication Islamic fundamentalists could hardly afford. No American client-state, even as small and poor as Vietnam, Nicaragua or Grenada, has been permitted to develop a viable economy devoted primarily to the nurture of its own people.

In these cases, the United States depended on the alleged threat of Communist aggression to justify its own. Can it really get along without it? If Orwell's prophecy is fulfilled it may not have to. The superpowers may, as he suggests, evolve a cynical concordat that will generate a steady and controlled supply of menace sufficient to keep the current system in business. Or Japan may be recast in a replay of the scenarios that proved so serviceable 50 years ago. Or for a time, a mutual war-effort may be sustained by diverting it to the destruction of the bizarre but rather effective semi-private drug-based economies prevalent in the Andes and Southeast Asia. There are plenty of more profitable alternatives to peaceful social development and the threat to hegemony it entails, if the economies of client-states can be controlled.

Since Canada is already so completely a client-state of the United States, the kind of detente Orwell envisioned would have little obvious or immediate effect on relations between the two neighbors. It would diminish or eliminate any threat attributable to the possibility of Soviet attack. But U.S. anxiety about Soviet influence in the Western hemisphere has never been so much a response to any military threat, real or imagined, as to the more realistic possibility that a socialist

economy and ideology, growing from native roots, might flourish with Soviet assistance. That assistance will presumably no longer be available; though Canada, in any case, has not sought or accepted any, maintaining a cold frontier toward its neighbor to the north. Still, a nation that provides medical service without fee to all its residents and includes a member of the Socialist International among its major political parties can hardly be above suspicion.

The chief long-term effect of the Orwellian detente—if the detente itself lasts long enough to have any—would, I believe, be to leave the United States even freer than it has been to adopt such policies as it may choose in dealing with its clients and neighbors. The defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua has been hailed as a victory by the United States even freer than it has been to adopt such policies as it may choose in dealing with its clients and neighbors. The defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua has been hailed as a victory by the United States. The most frightening aspect of this reaction has nothing to do with Nicaragua as such. It is the assumption that the United States has a right—indeed, a moral duty—to invade and destroy the governments of states that might someday threaten its economic interests, and the magical power to declare the governments it then supports to be “democratic,” death squads and all. What is discussed is whether the correct form of American intervention was used: whether, in Nicaragua, the people might have been more amenable to American persuasion if the United States had merely starved them out without also training and dispatching “freedom fighters” to kill 30,000 of them.

American intervention in Central America has become so familiar that it no longer arouses much alarm. The bizarre grandiosity of U.S. policy toward weak socialist regimes anywhere in the world is more apparent when the object of its intervention is more remote. Consider, for example, this excerpt from *The New York Times* for March 18, 1990:

Randall Robinson, executive director of Trans-Africa, a coalition of prominent American blacks, told reporters after a meeting with [U.S. Secretary of State] Baker last week, “I just don’t know how you justify \$900 million for Hungary and Poland and \$500,000 for Namibia.”

Perhaps the thorniest issue Mr. Baker will address will be American policy toward the Soviet-backed dos Santos government in Angola.

The Bush Administration’s continued support for the Angolan guerilla leader, Jonas Savimbi, according to Representative Howard Wolpe, the Michigan Democrat who heads the House Africa subcommittee, “is driven entirely by right-wing Republican politics and a desire to demon-

strate that while the Bush Administration may have, in right-wing eyes, sold out everywhere else, they are still hanging tough on Angola—even though the Angolan government has done nothing to attack American interests.”

[A senior] State Department official said that the message Mr. Baker would be carrying to the Angolan factions is that the United States would continue to provide covert assistance to Mr. Savimbi, estimated at about \$50 million a year, “until such time as national reconciliation takes place.”

But the official added: “I think it’s important to note that we’re not asking for the overthrow of the Government, we’re not asking for any type of regime, we’re not asking that Jonas Savimbi be made President of Angola. All we’re asking for is for the Government of Angola to reconcile with a major dissident organization that represents a significant number of Angolan [sic], to get together with them, negotiate a new political order in Angola, and we will be very happy to bow out.”<sup>1</sup>

The fact that public opinion polls show strong and increasing approval of President Bush is cited as further evidence that American policy is successful. Well, it certainly has been; though in common prudence Americans should ask “successful at what?” But few do. Public opinion in the United States provides no effective check on aggressive and arrogant foreign policy; it never has. American political organization provides very little scope for effective analysis of public policy. Note, for example, that the service of George Bush as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency simply did not become an issue in the Presidential campaign. Jesse Jackson’s effort to raise the issues of homelessness and the impoverishment of American society elicited not debate but scorn within the Democratic campaign. Jackson’s attempt to deal with real issues was dismissed as bad political strategy: naive and self-defeating. Which, considering the costs of a political campaign and the dependence of candidates on the support of established economic interests for funds and media attention, it may have been. As de Tocqueville observed 150 years ago, the American political system stifles divergent political opinion. Despite its vaunted “checks and balance” its brakes function unreliably when applied to power and economic advantage; they’re designed that way.

In recent years, the American Leviathan has avoided disaster by feeding primarily on organisms very much smaller than itself. But its hour of triumph leaves the United States in dreadful jeopardy. There are appalling parallels between the temptations it faces in 1990 and those that lured the German government to its destruction and that of

much of the world after the Munich crisis and the invasion of Czechoslovakia.

The United States now has neither the incentive nor the means to stop its own bullying. It seems destined, therefore, to come to grief, whether by setting off one bush war after another until it finds itself in a conflagration it can neither control nor escape; or by mortgaging its resources and its people to creditors as ruthless as itself beyond its ability to service its debts, or both. This may not happen in our lifetime; if it does, it will surely be just at the end of it. But evolution has seldom dealt kindly with large predators. It would be prudent, if possible, to avoid sharing their outrageous fortune.

This, to be sure, is more easily said than done. The American economy has been permitted to metastasize throughout that of Canada, infecting all its organs—often more virulently—with the disorders to which it may be subject. Canada probably could not establish an independent position if it tried. Even to suggest such a possibility is to reveal a gross misunderstanding of the nature of the national state. The interests of Canada's elites are very well served by their integration into the American economy. They are comfortably ensconced in some of the *Titanic's* more luxurious suites; and are well aware that, were the vessel to founder, the First Class passengers would probably be rescued while the Economy Class were left to cling to the wreckage. American media and intelligence services know no national boundary and have little reason to take note of the longest undefended one. Canadian economic independence, like the Avro Arrow, would never be permitted to get off the ground.

American foreign policy, at present, has taken a less strident tone. Righteous Americans boast that relentless American pressure hastened the collapse of the Evil Empire; but are more than satisfied that the inherent defects of socialist economies would inevitably have led to its demise. Socialism, obviously, doesn't work! Does capitalism work? That question cannot even be raised in American terms, where the inability of the economy to provide housing or health care for millions of Americans is taken as evidence of a virile affirmation of the work-ethic rather than of failure. Does free, private enterprise work? It does, after a fashion; if private investment is underwritten by tax-abatement and deduction of interest charges from taxable income; and if the multibillion dollar losses of entrepreneurs and their investors are covered by guarantees at the taxpayer's expense. Americans have perfected, insofar as perfection is possible, the system of private investment for private profit at public risk and public expense; and

remain, as ever, eager to share it with less fortunate peoples all over the world. Since fighting a superpower is very expensive and debilitating, their fortunes may, indeed, be briefly improved.

The haste with which the triumph of investment capital and the demise of socialism has been proclaimed and celebrated is, however, disturbing and premature. The presumably fatal illness of Soviet bloc economies cannot be totally ascribed to natural causes. Western economic policies struggled unremittingly to strangle them and largely succeeded. What they might have accomplished if shielded from the machinations of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the threat of American military intervention will never be known; though it is one of the sadder ironies of recent history that the assistance of these agencies and of American private enterprise in the Third World has shown that American investment may be even more destructive than American hostility.

There is, after all, nothing in *1984* to establish that the squalid world depicted by Orwell is meant to represent the endgame of Communism more closely than that of Capitalism; though American readers assume that it is. And recent events can hardly be held to prove that an economic system designed to produce goods and services to meet human needs must be less successful than one that squanders its resources on speculation and leveraged buy outs in the interest of endowing a few fortunate—or rather, privileged—individuals with huge, ephemeral profits. In practice, both systems seem to become sides of the same coin: a token of human alienation from the resources on which we might draw to sustain a decent life.

In Canada we know, at least, what to call a coin like that.

#### NOTES

1. "Baker, in Africa, Will Press Mandela on Socialism," 22.