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Summary

Eric Arthur Blair—more commonly known as George Orwell—would have celebrated his 100th birthday last month. A self-described “democratic socialist,” he wrote much about the dangers of government power. Orwell’s warnings strike an especially resonant chord in the current political climate, when we are asked to sacrifice freedom for security and stability.

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“Orwell showed rare political and literary courage during a period when criticism of Soviet-style statism was not tolerated by the mainstream.”

One hundred years of Orwellian thought

By Joseph Coon

The famous Eric Arthur Blair would have celebrated his 100th birthday last month. Although few recognize his given name, Blair was born on June 25, 1903 and adopted his pen name—George Orwell—at the age of 30. He died in 1950 before reaching his 47th birthday. His critiques of government power still ring true today.

Orwell asserted, “At any given moment there is an orthodoxy, a body of ideas which it is assumed that all right-thinking people will accept without question.” In Orwell’s time the prevailing orthodoxy embraced systems of government central planning, most prominently exemplified by Soviet Russia. Orwell examined communism and other totalitarian systems and declared them an abysmal failure by any measure that took personal freedoms into account.

In doing so, Orwell showed rare political and literary courage during a period when criticism of Soviet-style statism was not tolerated by the mainstream. After consulting government officials, a British publisher rejected one of Orwell’s novels; the publisher said the book “might be regarded as something which it was [sic] highly ill-advised to publish at the present time.”

Orwell’s most famous works, and those that generated the most controversy, are the classic novels *Animal Farm* and *1984*. More than 50 years after their first publication both books accurately illustrate the dangers of expanding government power.

Having witnessed the rise of totalitarian leaders such as Hitler and Stalin, Orwell cultivated contempt for political control and infused his writing with condemnation for government oppression. Orwell artfully used animal characters in *Animal Farm* to depict Stalin’s rise to power and the creation of Soviet communism. The parable illustrates the moral and systemic bankruptcy of the Russian Revolution. He captures the contradiction inherent in communist ideology with the ruling pigs’ final and only commandment: “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.”

In *1984*, Orwell describes a society where the government monitors every aspect of daily life. “Big Brother,” the leader of the ruling party, uses technology to erode

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privacy rights and keep watch over the general population. Walter Cronkite wrote in the preface to the 1984 edition of *1984*, the novel is an “essay on power, how it is acquired and maintained, how those who seek it or seek to keep it tend to sacrifice anything in its name.” Orwell offered a warning to those who take personal freedom for granted and cautioned that liberty and individualism would not survive in a society where citizens allow government to abuse power.

Orwell considered himself a “democratic socialist” and advocated government intervention in economic affairs. Unfortunately, Orwell failed to recognize that the centralized power he endorsed was also the fundamental flaw of the political ideologies he despised; they differed only in degree, not in kind. Whether Soviet-style communism or “democratic socialism,” attempts to bestow far-reaching power in government hands poses the same systemic threats.

Despite his own collectivist tendencies, Orwell did recognize the dangers of such politics. In a review of F.A. Hayek’s book *The Road to Serfdom*, which examines the relationship between individual liberty and government power, Orwell wrote, “collectivism is not inherently democratic, but, on the contrary, gives to a tyrannical minority such powers as the Spanish Inquisition never dreamt of.”

Orwell’s warnings strike a resonant chord in the current political climate, where we are asked to sacrifice freedom for security and stability. “Big Brother” is a literary metaphor of government encroachment into, and control over, the lives of ordinary people. If we are to avoid an Orwellian society we must reverse the growth of government and its power, and limit the state to its legitimate function of defending personal *and* economic liberty.

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