

President Obama and Brave New World

By George Cunningham

President Barack Obama caused a bit of a stir recently when one of the books he took on a family vacation to Martha's Vineyard was Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. The novel, written in 1931, portrays a world of the future, where citizens are encouraged to get high, engage in orgies, and be good consumers. Since there is only one government that covers the entire world, there are no wars.

It turned out that the book was probably for the president's 13-year-old daughter, Malia Obama, since it is required reading for 8th graders at the private school she and her sister attend and not part of her father's yet-to-be revealed plan to turn the economy around.

The remarkable thing about the story was not so much what books the President planned to read on vacation, but the fact that a science-fiction novel could still be so press-worthy 80 years after it was written.

There are only two novels that stir such strong response. One is *Brave New World*, which is set in the year 2540 and *Nineteen Eighty Four* by George Orwell, which was written in 1949 and set in the title year. I read them both when I was about Malia's age, which was a long, long time ago.

Orwell's book looked 35 years into the future, where the world is run by a dictator – not so much a man as an image – called Big Brother. The protagonist, Winston Smith, works as a functionary in the Ministry of Truth, where his job is to change old newspaper articles to reflect the revisions of history dictated by the party. The inside of his and everybody else's apartment has a surveillance system that monitors everything he does, and helicopters fly through the city looking into people's windows to make sure nobody does anything subversive.

In Orwell's book, the world is constantly at war, although the sides change from time-to-time. The Ministry of Peace is in charge of war, the Ministry of Truth in charge of propaganda, and the Ministry of Love is in charge of torture and brainwashing. The Thought Police make sure nobody thinks politically incorrect thoughts.

The population is kept in check through intimidation, misinformation, and harsh consequences for anybody who voices unpopular thoughts.

In *Brave New World*, on the other hand, nobody has to censor history or worry about subversive thoughts, because nobody cares about history or thinking. The state raises children from fetus to adulthood, first at hatcheries, and then at conditioning centres.

Since the state controls all birth, the population of the world is capped at 2 billion people. There are no families, there is only the maxim that “everyone belongs to everyone else.” Families, emotional relationships, and jealousy are obsolete concepts.

The civilized world is divided into five castes – Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, and Epsilon – determined by the state when the individual is still a fetus. Only the Alpha fetuses are allowed to develop normally. Fetuses from the other four castes are treated with chemicals to limit their intelligence or their physical size. Members of all five castes are raised to think their caste is the best. To reinforce that belief, members of each caste attend Solidarity Services where they sing songs, take drugs, and have an orgy.

The way I always thought of it, Orwell’s book reflects the totalitarian regime we are most familiar with from Stalin in the Soviet Union to Kim Jong-il in North Korea. Huxley’s book, on the other hand, reflects the totalitarian regime of the future – a kind of nanny-state run amok, where everybody is happy because the state makes sure they are healthy and high and they are all too self-absorbed to know better.

Frankly, both books scared the heck out of me. I hope Malia is made of sterner stuff.

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