

Remarks Prepared for Delivery at
The University of Michigan Commencement
Ann Arbor, December 18, 1983

Cecil Mackey
President
Michigan State University

Thoughts on 1984's Eve

Were someone to ask us to cite particular years that we would identify as having major historical significance, we would probably produce a relatively short but generally accepted list. It would most likely include 1776, which we associate with our national independence, and 1492, the year Columbus discovered America.

Reaching back a bit farther, some might suggest 1215, the signing of the Magna Carta, or 1066, the year of the Norman Conquest, or even 476, the fall of the Roman Empire. The literary among us might recall readily that Shakespeare was born in 1564 and the Gutenberg Bible was printed in 1455. In this year of the divestiture of AT&T, some will remember Alexander Graham Bell's first telephone message, "Mr. Watson come here. I want you!" in 1876. Aviation buffs know that 1903 at Kitty Hawk marked the beginning of the era of flight. There are baseball fans who cherish the memory of where they were and what they were doing in 1956 when Don Larson pitched the first perfect World Series game, and no small number of Wolverines understand fully the importance of 1969 and the arrival of Bo Schembechler in Ann Arbor.

In point of fact, there are, for most of us and for most people throughout the world, only a few such years to which we attach great personal or societal significance.

There have been even fewer years identified by individuals or societies as having prospective importance -- years that have been broadly anticipated with either hope or fear and looked to as having critical meaning. Individuals anticipate birthdays: 16 and 21 are considered good and too slow in coming; 40 and 50 on the other hand are often viewed with concern and arrive too soon. Special events like graduations and retirements are treated as milestones, but, like birthdays, are highly personal. Even a national birthday in the form of a bicentennial has a special context and limited impact.

The year 1000 AD was another matter. Many believed that it would be apocalyptic. The world would end. That was really quite a prospect, especially for people who had vivid and well developed concepts of what the fires of hell were like.

While interpretations by historians differ about how people reacted and what plans they made, it is clear that people's thoughts and behavior were widely affected by their belief of what the year 1000 would bring. Some historians believe that dramatic economic, sociological, and demographic changes of the period immediately following the year 1000 resulted from reactions to the fact that the world did not actually come to an end.

In contemporary times, there is no year like 1984. George Orwell (actually Eric Arthur Blair who used George Orwell as a pseudonym), through his novel entitled 1984, has given the coming year a unique character for much of the world. The book has, without doubt, been one of the most influential books of this century. A powerful and prophetic political satire, it was an immediate best seller when published in 1949 and has continued to be widely read as a classic ever since.

Not only did Orwell make 1984 a benchmark year, so vivid was his depiction of dehumanizing totalitarianism, that simply to say "1984" was enough to evoke the image of Big Brother and ruthless oppression. "1984" became synonymous with harsh, raw political power exercised for its own sake. Through the fifties, sixties and seventies, exploitation of technology to destroy individual freedom or abuse of authority in the name of the state was typically characterized as a harbinger of the early arrival of the dreaded era -- 1984.

Besides giving us a detailed picture of terror and repression in the fictional nation of Oceania, Orwell also added considerably to our political vocabulary. He created Newspeak, the language of

authoritarian bureaucracy, and Doublethink, the capacity to hold two contradictory views at the same time, believing both to be true. He let us know that "Big Brother is Watching," described the actions of the "Thought Police," and showed how individuals in disfavor became "Unpersons." Oceania's Ministry of Peace made war; the Ministry of Truth rewrote history and manipulated news; and the Ministry of Love was the State's instrument of repression.

Oceania's three major slogans were:

War is Peace

Freedom is Slavery

Ignorance is Strength

According to Aldous Huxley -- the author of Brave New World, an equally famous vision of the future, "a book about the future can interest us only if its prophecies look as though they might conceivably come true." Orwell clearly thought that there were tendencies toward "1984" when he wrote in 1949. And since then, many readers, as well as others who only know about the book, have feared that Orwell's "1984" would actually come.

You go through this commencement -- your personal rite of passage traditionally marking the beginning of a career -- on the eve of 1984. It seems appropriate to ask what is the significance for you of Orwell's nightmare vision of things to come?

Obviously, for each of you, the calendar year 1984 will not be Orwell's "1984." In the western democracies, freedom remains the tradition, although there are those who believe that individual freedom, and possibly even the desire for it, may be on the wane. In much of the rest of the world, such freedom has never been, or has ceased to be, the tradition or the prevailing condition. Advances in technology seem to have facilitated the spread and intensified the application of the techniques for oppression and the restriction of free inquiry and dissent. Far too many examples come readily to mind: Maoist China, the Soviet dominated East, Haiti, Iran -- other examples exist in Africa, Latin America and the Far East. And even though we pride ourselves on our traditions and cherish the view that "it can't happen here," our own media reports on almost any given day provide ample evidence that we cannot become complacent.

Film fans who saw one of this year's movies, "Blue Thunder," saw chilling examples of available technology and weaponry and their potential for abuse at the expense of individual freedom.

The question for your era, stated more broadly, is whether technology will be master or servant -- a tool of oppression or an instrument for the general welfare.

- Will a simple technological imperative determine the outcome of Baby Jane Doe type cases, or will they be resolved through wisdom and humane consideration?
- Will the benefits of agricultural technology help feed the growing number of the world's hungry or will the new technology merely exacerbate an already inadequate world-food distribution mechanism?
- What will become of those who hold the 30 million U.S. jobs that are projected to disappear in the next three decades because of the development of Artificial Intelligence?
- What is the likelihood that increasing economic instability will cause wider acceptance of authoritarian control in the name of order?

In Orwell's Oceania of "1984," there are no universities. An institution such as the University of Michigan would be unthinkable, its graduates feared as a threat to the regime. And why would it be unthinkable? Because the University's mission is to search for truth, to know and nurture the truth, to create new knowledge and publish it freely. Because universities such as yours have been assigned the responsibility of continually challenging the physical and philosophical beliefs about our society and our universe.

Your 1984 will not be like Orwell's "1984," possibly because the prophecy itself has helped us avoid the world the prophet foresaw. What this University is, what it stands for, and what it does have been important in determining what your 1984 will be.

This University of Michigan and other major American universities like it will be critical in determining the nature of your future. They must remain dedicated to excellence and committed to developing their graduates' highest intellectual and analytical skills. Such universities serve as a fundamental humanizing force in their society, teaching their graduates how to choose wisely on the basis of sound values.

We can take comfort and pride in the fact that our universities have not been significantly politicized nor does the government close them for political reasons, as happens in many countries. In the United States, it would simply be unthinkable for the government to close a college or a university.

Even though we are not immediately threatened with George Orwell's "1984," or with the closing of universities for political reasons, other, more subtle but still destructive dangers, do threaten. Without strong support, our finest universities cannot continue to give, as the University of Michigan has given you, the finest educational opportunities in the world. More than a decade of declining support and underfunding have eroded the base of excellence and placed the future of this great university, and my own, in jeopardy. You will not have met your responsibilities as graduates of this university, or as citizens, unless you personally help assure that those who come after you as students have at least the same outstanding opportunity you have had.

It was said of George Orwell that one of his strongest personal characteristics was "... to do at any point in life the thing that seemed to him most important." What a marvelous trait to have. Let me urge you, as you enter 1984, to adopt that philosophy. Be an activist for what you believe is important -- make the future of the University of Michigan important to you, and do something about it.

Congratulations on your graduation. Go Blue!