Is There a 1984 in Our Future? A Super Bowl Reflection

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What was the greatest Super Bowl commercial of all time?

With Super Sunday just around corner, we will cite the Apple commercial that introduced the Apple Macintosh personal computer in January 1984. It had the punch line: “You’ll see why 1984 won’t be like Nineteen Eighty-Four.”

That was an allusion to the dystopian future described in George Orwell's book, 1984. The ad opens with a lone woman on the run. She bursts into an auditorium, where Big Brother—speaking not in person, but from a towering television screen—is haranguing a frightened mass of people. Then, spinning like a top, she hurls a sledgehammer at the figure on the screen. It flies high and right. Big Brother is silenced. The voice-over followed.

In this 60-second spot that aired during Super Bowl XVIII, the first Macintosh ad captured the one thing that an all-powerful or monolithic state cannot easily afford to tolerate. That is, any real expression of individual freedom and initiative.

We believe that is a timely message not just on the eve of another Super Bowl, but still more in the context of the current debate over economic and public policies.
Following a long period of stagnation, the U.S. economy has come roaring back to life. We now have full employment, a booming stock market, and rising wages for most workers, including the lowest paid.

How did that happen? Fast answer: Over the past three years, the free market became a whole lot freer.

In its first year in office, the current administration delivered on its promise of sweeping regulatory relief. Suddenly, the regulatory state, which had expanded by leaps and bounds during the previous administration, began to contract . . . and that has continued, as a result of major changes in policy and direction at the Environmental Protection Agency, the Labor Department, the Department of Health and Human Services, and other arms of government.

Then came the biggest tax cuts and tax reforms since the Reagan era. With the passage of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, the administration lowered income taxes across the board and left more money in the pockets of individuals and business entities alike.

So, we are now living in the best of times economically. How could anyone argue otherwise? But they can—and are. Never mind what the numbers say.

Among leaders on the Left, there is a broad consensus that we are living not in the best of times, but in the most desperate of times—almost as if we were back in the early years of the Great Depression, when industrial production plunged, unemployment soared, and more than a quarter of the population was without any income at all.

In the badly mistaken belief that capitalism and free enterprise have run amok, they are promoting economic policies and ideas that are diametrically opposed to those that got us where we are today.

With little disagreement between them, these same leaders want free college, free health care for all, universal child care, and the banning of fossil fuels as part of a many-splendored Green New Deal—and they don’t appear to care what anything costs or what the adverse impact may be on ordinary people.

Apart from the astronomically high price tags associated with all of these programs—which would quickly bring the economy to a shuddering halt if any serious attempt were made to implement them—it is worth thinking about the underlying message that the leaders who are espousing this great agglomeration of multi-trillion-dollar programs want to send to the American people.

The real take-away message comes down to this:

· “If you or any of your children want to go to college, don’t worry about being able to afford the college tuition. We’ll take care of the problem for you.”

· “If you’re worried about health care, don’t think you have to buy health insurance or do anything else. We’ll take care of you.”
If all that sounds too good to be true, it’s because it is too good to be true. Someone has to pay for college tuition—and all the other freebies—and that can only mean higher taxes on working people at all levels of income.

As George Orwell, the author of 1984, understood very well, a free people who stop taking care of themselves and rely on the state to do everything for them make a very bad bargain. It is one of the insights you find on almost every page of his book.

When people cease to make their own plans—and trust government to make decisions for them in more and more areas of their lives—they commit the error of failing to make full use of their capacities as individual human beings. In failing to make the most of their own gifts and talents, and their own dreams and aspirations, they sell themselves short . . . and lead less-fulfilling lives.

How prophetic was Orwell’s book? Not that this was the author’s intention, but how well did the book foretell the future of socialism in his native country—this being Britain in the first few years after World War II?

The British elections in mid-1945 marked a major turning point—not only sweeping Winston Churchill and a Tory-led government out of office, but also standing as an unquestioned affirmation of the desire of most of the British electorate to bring a new government to power that was fully committed to socialism.

So how did things work out in Britain during the three and a half decades when socialism, as opposed to free-market capitalism, was the prevailing mode of government—a period lasting from 1945 to 1979, when Margaret Thatcher came to power?

Socialist Britain did not become a police state. But it did undergo a metamorphosis. It changed from a powerful and dynamic country into the perennial “sick man of Europe,” reeling from one financial crisis to another in a sustained period of economic stagnation and decline. It became a country obsessed with issues of job security and income redistribution as different groups competed with one another in trying to wring more favors out of an increasingly improvident state. There was little or no new business formation—none of the spark provided by people like Steve Jobs and products like the first Macintosh computer.

Even the Labor Party could see the futility of its centralized, interventionist approach. Jim Callaghan, the last Labor prime minister before Thatcher, admitted in Parliament: “Let me say that of course there has been a fall in peoples’ standard of life. It has fallen this year and will fall again next year.”

Fortunately, Thatcher supplied the leadership that was necessary to pull Britain out of the decades-long decline that began with the wrong turn that it took at the end of World War II.

Is there any possibility that we as a country could make the same mistake that Britain made in 1945?
The danger is there. It is time to throw another hammer—or sledgehammer—into the works of another historic wrong turn—this time involving the United States.

This does not require heroic action on the part of a solitary individual. But it does require a willingness on the part of many people to play the same kind of role within their own group of friends and relatives that Thatcher played in Britain—in stressing the paramount importance of individual freedom and initiative in securing the future we want for ourselves and future generations.

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