

Short Term Historians

“We have always been at war with Eastasia”

By

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August 15, 2021

Back in 2015, a few months before our nation’s presidential election, between Clinton and Trump, I happened into a bar in Budapest, Hungary where a friendly patron named Michael struck up a conversation with me. He reflected the diversity within this Eastern European international city by almost immediately introducing himself as an “African Irish Hungarian.” He was, indeed, a dark-skinned fellow with a thick Irish brogue living in a Hungarian city. Once he realized I’m an American he went straight to the election topic. Although I can no longer remember the details of our conversation, I was impressed with his knowledge, not only of our current politics, but of the history of our politics, and his ability to connect the dots between the changes in American attitudes all the way back to what happened before the Nixon Administration. Before long, another patron, this time a Polish fellow, who had been drinking alone while listening in on our conversation, interjected and was just as well versed in the history of American politics. Not only were he and Michael keenly interested in the coming election, but they both recalled modern U.S. political history better than most Americans I know. Between an African Irish Hungarian and a Polish man, I wondered if everyone in the world might recall it better than we do.

Their recollection of the past political events in our country was impressive considering many Americans tend to forget what transpired last year, let alone years ago in our country. Perhaps we don’t actually forget the past as much as we have selective memories: remembering the things we prefer to remember, or as we prefer to remember them.

This summer, for example, in light of the unprecedented heatwave, drought, and fires the world is experiencing, I’ve become increasingly resentful of the Republican party. Just this past week, regardless of the undeniable reality around us, I heard two different individuals dismiss global warming by claiming, “When we were growing up, all they ever talked about was a new Ice Age.”

“No, they didn’t,” I rebuffed.

“Yes, they did. That’s all they talked about back then.”

“No. I never heard anybody say that.” I replied.

I’m sure there were some people, including some scientists, whom may have occasionally grabbed the media’s attention by hypothesizing that we were entering an Ice Age after an unusually cold winter somewhere, but it was never a widely held belief or something everyone was talking about. It certainly wasn’t a concern the greater scientific community was warning us about or, at least, trying to warn us about.

The greenhouse gas effect, on the other hand, was first theorized by French physicist, Joseph Fourier way back in 1824, and proven by experimental physicist, John Tyndall as early as 1859. Scientists also first calculated global warming from human produced CO₂

emissions in 1896. In 1938, Canadian inventor Guy Stewart Callendar claimed CO₂ was heating up the Earth, which is why global warming was originally called the “Callendar Effect.” And way back in 1960, American scientist, Charles Keeling detected an annual rise in temperatures caused by human produced greenhouse gases.

In the 1970s, President Jimmy Carter, a former nuclear engineer, read a lot of scientific articles about environmental problems, including a formative 1972 article in *Nature* about carbon dioxide pollution, while he was still the Governor of Georgia. He was concerned enough about the problem that when he became President, he signed fourteen major environmental bills into law and was the first to use federal funding for alternative energy, as well as issuing fuel economy standards and putting solar panels on the White House roof. In 1977, close to the end of what he hoped would be just his first term in office, President Carter commissioned the Global 2000 Report to the President, which a 2020 article in *Time* describes as, “an ambitious effort to explore environmental challenges and the prospects of ‘sustainable development’ (a new phrase) over the next 20 years.”¹ That’s right, Carter had hoped to create a sustainable relationship with the environment by 2000, including addressing global warming, which scientist at the time called, “carbon dioxide pollution.”

The *Time* article says one of the resulting reports, written by “Carter’s top aide on the environment, urged ‘immediate action’ and included calculations on CO₂ emissions in the next decades that proved surprisingly accurate. The large-scale burning of oil, coal and other fossil fuels could lead to ‘widespread and pervasive changes in global climatic, economic, social, and agricultural patterns,’ the CEQ report concluded with great prescience.”² It was so prescient, in fact, that the report “suggested trying to limit global average temperature to 2°C above preindustrial levels—precisely the standard agreed to by the nations of the world 35 years later in the Paris Climate Agreement.”³

Given the nature of politics, we can, perhaps, understand why Ronald Reagan chose to make Carter’s environmentalism a negative campaign issue, including by ludicrously claiming that more than 80% of nitrogen oxide air pollution is ‘caused by trees and vegetation.’⁴ Nevertheless, after making it a campaign issue, republicans, in general, began acting as if they had always been against environmental protections, even though it was Richard Nixon, a Republican President, who established the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970, only a decade before Reagan took office.

After defeating Carter, Reagan eventually had the White House solar panels removed. And when his former Vice President, George H.W. Bush was running against Clinton in 1996, he mocked his running mate, Al Gore, for his well-known environmental concerns, calling him “Ozone Man,” and claiming, “This guy is so far out in the environmental extreme we’ll be up to our necks in owls and out of work for every American.”⁵ During the infamous 2000 Bush/Gore election, George W. Bush also went after Gore’s environmental interests, and we all

know the first thing Trump did after taking office was to withdraw the U.S. from the historic Paris Climate Agreement.

But the peculiar inconsistency I want to especially point out is that during the 2000 election the Republicans were still claiming that global warming itself was a hoax, and falsely claimed there was much debate among scientist about it. Just four years later, however, global warming had become undeniable, at least for anyone who didn't wish to look like a complete idiot. So, during Bush's campaign for reelection, his Party subtly shifted their argument to claim that scientists disagreed only about its cause, so they could continue supporting our nation's dependence on fossil fuels and the black gold they had been securing in their unwarranted Oil War in Iraq, justified by the terrorist attacks on September 11th. It didn't matter to most Americans that those hijackers responsible were from Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, and Egypt, and had nothing to do with Iraq. In no time at all, they had completely come to associate what happened on 9/11 with Saddam Hussein.

This reminds me of a bizarre social phenomenon underscored in George Orwell's iconic horror novel, *1984*. In the book, Oceania, one of the three major world powers, has always been at war with either Eastasia or Eurasia. But as the novel continues, Big Brother occasionally switches which one it is at war with. Sometimes it's Eastasia and sometimes Eurasia. When the novel begins, it is at war with Eurasia and in alliance with Eastasia, and, as Orwell explains, "In no public or private utterance was it ever admitted that the three powers had at any time been grouped along different lines."⁶ Of course the story's protagonist, Winston Smith, "well knew, it was only four years since Oceania had been at war with Eastasia and in alliance with Eurasia":

But that was merely a piece of furtive knowledge which he happened to possess because his memory was not satisfactorily under control. Officially the change of partners had never happened. Oceania was at war with Eurasia: therefore Oceania had always been at war with Eurasia. The enemy of the moment always represented absolute evil, and it followed that any past or future agreement with him was impossible.⁷

The same thing seems to have happened in real life. Even though Republican President Richard Nixon established the EPA, after Reagan/Bush ran against Clinton/Gore, *therefore*, to paraphrase Orwell, *Republicans have always been at war with the environment. Environmentalists always represented absolute evil, and it follows that any past or future agreement with them is impossible. Or, we have always said scientists disagree about the cause of global warming, never that they disagree it's happening.*

What's more, in *1984*, people don't just pretend to have forgotten that they once held opposite beliefs, they've really forgotten. Winston's secret lover, Julia, for instance, admits that she thinks the entire war is a sham, yet she has never noticed the name of the enemy keeps changing. "I thought we'd always been at war with Eurasia,"⁸ she said. This

frightened Winston a little, but, even more disturbing, after he is finally able to jog her memory and get her to admit things had once been different, she didn't seem to mind. "Who cares?" she said impatiently. "It's always one bloody war after another, and one knows the news is all lies anyway."⁹ It was the same with the Iraq war. Anytime we reminded its supporters that Iraq had nothing to do with the terrorist attacks, or that no weapons of mass destruction existed there, they simply shrugged their shoulders. I once got an angry message left on the answering machine at the church in Louisville after I'd been in the news for protesting the war in Iraq, saying, "Look at all the Americans they'll killed on 9/11." The caller also suggested that if I love Iraq so much I and all my lesbian members should go live there.

That's how it works, those who reject the false narrative are the ones accused of being out of their minds. When, in *1984*, Winston is eventually arrested and tortured with electroshock, his tormentor uses the question of who Oceania is at war with to brainwash him into disbelieving what he knows is true:

"I am taking trouble with you, Winston," he said, "because you are worth trouble. You know perfectly well what is the matter with you. You have known it for years, though you have fought against the knowledge. You are mentally deranged. You suffer from a defective memory. You are unable to remember real events and you persuade yourself that you remember other events which never happened. Fortunately it is curable. You have never cured yourself of it, because you did not choose to. There was a small effort of the will that you were not ready to make. Even now, I am well aware, you are clinging to your disease under the impression that it is a virtue. Now we will take an example. At this moment, which power is Oceania at war with?"

"When I was arrested, Oceania was at war with Eastasia."

"With Eastasia. Good. And Oceania has always been at war with Eastasia, has it not?"

Winston drew in his breath. He opened his mouth to speak and then did not speak. He could not take his eyes away from the dial.

"The truth, please, Winston. Your truth. Tell me what you think you remember."

"I remember that until only a week before I was arrested, we were not at war with Eastasia at all. We were in alliance with them. The war was against Eurasia. That had lasted for four years. Before that—"¹⁰

O'Brien stopped him with a movement of the hand.

Unfortunately, Winston succumbs to the torture and is eventually brainwashed into believing whatever Big Brother tells him, no matter how much it contradicts his own experience. The last line of the novel, perhaps its most chilling, simply states, "He loved Big Brother."

1984 was published in 1949, but the national short-term memory troubling Orwell then may be even worse today, given that social media allows the rapid spread of ridiculous conspiracy theories and alternate facts, and a 24-hour news cycle that rapidly moves from one top story to the next. Bestselling author, Steven Johnson alludes to this in the introduction to his new book, *Extra Life*, about the recent extension of human lifespan: "the

news understandably chooses to focus on the short-term fluctuations: an upcoming election, a celebrity scandal, all the surface tremors that distract us from the movement of the underlying plates. Without that long view, we forget all the threats that terrorized our great-grandparents but were transformed into nonevents or manageable conditions so mundane that most of us never think about them at all.”¹¹

This much may seem innocent enough, if not comforting. But forgetting the past leaves us vulnerable to missing the truths our forbears found out the hard way, and to unnecessarily repeating their mistakes until we learn them again for ourselves, the hard way. Beginning in 1918, for example, the, so-named, Spanish Flu, became a global pandemic and, like today, public health officials asked people to wear masks, social distance, and quarantine at home. Back then, however, advances in current science didn’t allow them to quickly develop a vaccine, and it became the second deadliest plague in human history, claiming the lives of more the fifty-million people worldwide.

This was so even though vaccines had been used to successfully treat smallpox since the end of the 18th century. Alas, at the time of the Spanish Flu, the science hadn’t advanced enough to quickly develop a vaccine. But not long afterward, in the 1930s, scientific advances did allow scientist to vaccinate against frightening diseases like diphtheria, tetanus, anthrax, cholera, plague, typhoid, and tuberculosis. Later in the 20th century, further advances led to vaccines against terrible childhood diseases like polio, measles, mumps, and rubella, which is the primary reason human lifespan itself has increased from less than 50 years in 1900 to over 80 years today.

Yet even though vaccine science has continued to advance, allowing today’s scientists to develop not one but several vaccines in less than a year, to counteract our current global plague, about half the people in the U.S. won’t take it, which is causing the disease to surge again. As with global warming, this resistance to vaccines is largely drawn on political grounds, based upon former President Trump’s unnecessary politicization of the matter, causing many of his supporters to initially claim the coronavirus was a hoax, and to resist mask mandates and social distancing, and, eventually, to remain unvaccinated out of unfounded fear of the government. As Steven Johnson writes:

by not thinking about that past, we can’t learn from it; we can’t use that history to think more clearly about what advances to pursue in our current quest to extend the human life span; we can’t use that history to prepare us for the unintended consequences those advances will inevitably bring; and we’re less likely to trust the resources and institutions that we possess now to combat emerging threats like the COVID-19 pandemic. We have absurd conspiracy theories about Bill Gates planting microchips via mass vaccination or outright hostility directed at simple acts like mask-wearing in part because we have forgotten, as a culture, how much science and medicine and public health have improved the quality (and the length) of the average human life over the past few generations.¹²

It's one thing for a few individuals to hold paranoid delusional ideas, but when they have disastrous impacts on all of us, including a planet that is burning up and drying up because of human caused global warming, and overridden hospitals and a global economy on the brink of disaster because of unreasonable vaccine resistance, something has to change. Maybe that change begins by remembering what things were really like not so long ago when we were still at war with Eastasia instead of Eurasia, back when Republicans were for environmental protections instead of against them, and when vaccine science saved the lives of our precious children and doubled our lifespans instead of causing us to fear being implanted with microchips.

These days our short-term memory is getting the best of our society, endangering our lives, and ruining our planet. If we can't remember our past, even our most recent past, how can we learn from it? How can we prevent ourselves from repeating historic mistakes, or from making new mistakes that can easily be avoided? All of this reminds me of one of my favorite TV shows growing up in the 70s, *Kung Fu*.

Young Kwai Chang Caine asks, "Is it good to seek the past Master Po? Does it not rob us of the present?"

To which the old wise man replies, "If a man dwells in the past then he robs the present, but if he ignores the past, he may rob the future. The seeds of our destiny are nurtured by the roots of the past."

¹ <https://time.com/5894179/jimmy-carter-climate-change/>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/04/24/ozone-man>

⁶ Orwell, George . 1984 (p. 25). Kindle Edition.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 110.

⁹ Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 199.

¹¹ Johnson, Steven. Extra Life (p. xxi). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

¹² Ibid., p. xxi.