

LifelifTERS Pulpit Review Series
Part III:

The Plot Against America

By Philip Roth

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It seems to me that there are two salient facts of Jewish existence that we must acknowledge when reading Philip Roth's riveting novel, *The Plot Against America*. To forsake either one would be to diminish our appreciation of this dark, but engrossing and provocative story.

The first is our People's overwhelming reluctance, from the times of the Bible up until the most recent rabbinic responsa of this 21st century, to place unconditional trust in the government of any nation-state – Jewish or otherwise. “Make us a king,” the people clamored to Nathan! The Prophet Nathan, knowing of deep-seated royal frailty, urged them to reconsider! No such luck. They wanted to be like everyone else! So, they got King Saul – and an unhappy conclusion.

The Bible presents an endless array of wayward politicians and monarchs who, sooner or later, prove themselves faithless and prone to hubris, human error and sin. You name it, and Scripture offers us a politician of antiquity whose cruelty, perversity, and corruption rivals any that the subsequent ages has yet to witness.

“Trust not in princes” urges the Book of Proverbs. And, the rabbis of the Talmud offer the most reluctant endorsement of the utility of the state when they admonish – “Pray for the welfare of the government, there but for, men would eat one another alive.” That's hardly an enthusiastic endorsement of the institution of government.

So, that's number one. The state, the emperor, the president, and the king – all were most reluctantly accepted as necessary evils in managing the inherent combustible and uncertain quality of human nature in society.

II.

The second fact of our Jewish existence which inevitably plays a chilling role in this, Philip Roth's nightmarish “what if” novel, is the reality that anti-Semitism is a persistent possibility lying dormant in every society – regardless of how civilized and cultured.

Yes, this opportunistic virus lies in wait for social unrest or economic hard times, which are guaranteed to trigger its pernicious effects when the first gas line forms on the first large-scale layoffs are announced..

So, both the untrustworthiness of human government and the viral persistence of bigotry coalesce to make this novel, *The Plot Against America*, both a sinister and compelling morality tale.

Personalizing the betrayal of decency all the more is Roth's fashioning of his story as a memoir of his own childhood and family life. From the very outset, Roth tells us, “Listen to my story.” Roth is our third grade narrator, a boy frightened and perplexed by what has so unsettled his world and set his family's teeth on edge.

We find ourselves in the summer of 1940 when Philip Roth is only seven years old. He and his brother, Sandy, have gone to sleep while in an adjoining room of their Newark, New Jersey (largely Jewish) suburban neighborhood. Their mom and dad and cousin Alvin join most of the anxious neighbors in listening to the live radio report of the Republican National Convention in not-so-far-away Philadelphia. In truth, the nation is tuned-in.

Now, employing as characters mostly historical figures, and adopting their most damning, naïve, foolish, and outlandish attitudes, Roth takes his readers on a fearsome, ugly, threatening roller coaster ride to a suddenly fascist America.

In Roth's alternative universe, it is Charles Lindbergh (and not Wendell Wilkie) who is nominated to oppose FDR in his bid for a third term. Running on the "America First" platform to keep us out of war with Germany, candidate-then-President Lindbergh makes good on his promise by signing a non-aggression pact with Hitler in Iceland and celebrating it with a lavish White House dinner at which Nazi Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop is the guest of honor.

The nature of America doesn't fall at once like so many dominos into the abyss. But, it doesn't take as long as one would think. Oh, there are ardent voices raised in protest against America's slide toward Fascism and racial and ethnic belligerence. *The Plot Against America* is peopled by real-life historical characters, like the ill-fated Walter Winchell, whose urgent denunciations of America's direction and leadership are both heeded by the newly endangered, but ignored by the ascendant and the threatened. Winchell is later assassinated by the nativistic far right.

Yes, what we have here is a gigantic question of "What if it had really happened?" But, Roth's novel is much more. It is a strident, gutsy broadside on civic smugness and its pages awake us like a cold shower to the realization that "there but for the grace of God" went this nation.

Charles Lindbergh was real. He was a hero anointed by a hero-hungry world. He looked upon us Jews with more than a little distaste and suspicion. Specifically, Lindbergh, a former personal guest of Herman Goering and in league politically with British Ambassador Joseph Kennedy, feared that British and Jewish propaganda would push us into another European war. After the famous kidnapping, he and the Mrs. took up celebrity refuge in 1936 Germany. They were not at all uncomfortable with the anti-Jewish measures Hitler took in his rise to deathly power.

This buddy of anti-Semites Henry Ford and Father Coughlin opposed American intervention against Nazi Germany, at precisely the time that Joseph Kennedy was bluntly warning the Hollywood movie moguls against their making anti-Nazi films, lest the war against Hitler be blamed on America's Jews.

Following Roosevelt's reelection in 1940, Lindbergh – FDR's number one celebrity opponent – spoke at "America First" rallies. Secretary of the Interior Harold

Ickes (a decent, brave man), branded Lindy as “the Number One Nazi fellow traveler.” After Lindbergh addressed a rally of 80,00 at the Hollywood Bowl, Ickes remarked,

I have never heard this knight of the German Eagle
denounce Hitler or Nazism or Mussolini or fascism...
I have never heard him express a word of pity for the
Poles or the Jews who have been slaughtered by the
hundreds of thousands by Hitler’s savages.

So, Philip Roth weaves these truths and real personalities into a seven-year-old’s awareness of the disintegrating of his secure, loving world – even the very peace of his own relatives and household – because of events too big for even his authoritarian father to successfully counter.

As a boy, the narrator can barely cope with all of the subsequent calamities. Roth shows us through the eyes of a fearful child how swiftly democratic civility and security can become lost. National initiatives and proposals are quickly passed, like the “Just Folks Program,” which sets out to break up Jewish families and neighborhoods by scattering Jewish children into the Christian rural heartland. The father’s insurance company has agreed to relocate their Jewish agents into rural, all-Christian towns.

The narrator’s brother spends time in Kentucky in a “youth corps,” and sure enough, he returns to his family brainwashed and worshipfully protective of Lindbergh’s grandeur.

This book by Philip Roth is full of haunting parallels. It is provocative on many levels. It is deeply unsettling in the context of our current Bush-Cheney-DeLay-Rumsfeld political climate, where anti-warriors are immediately held suspect, where the Patriot Act and the existence of secret prisons are safeguarded, and when wholesale telephone bugging and administration-sanctioned and heavy-handed and cynical policies (the Dubai Ports) have threatened to be sustained and only at the last are reconsidered. Yes, this book is a worthy read.

Rest assured, dear ones, the Lindbergh administration does not prevail, though things become much worse and much bloodier before the nation comes to its senses. Pogroms take place – blood is spilled. But at last, history resumes its proper course, the Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor, and the book’s last 100 pages race toward a so-so resolution. Like the Jews in Shushan, Haman is replaced with Mordecai, and life resumes – if not as before, at least it is life.

Roth knows his history. He presents us with characters – Jews and gentiles, men and women, relatives and strangers, warriors and peacemakers, stupid rabbis and defiant ones, followers and leaders – all of whom are alternately fools and villains, heroes and saviors. And, he presents us with a little fellow – a third-grader, whose childhood is transformed by terrors because the adults in his world traded decency for complicity.

All are gathered here in this explosive story, one so vivid, yet so preposterous and dreamlike, and yet, as critic Paul Berman concludes, “at the same time, creepily plausible.”

I urge you to read it and do so a little each day in companion with the morning’s newspaper. Think about the comparisons and, oh yeah, keep close to you a new bottle of Pepto Bismal Extra Strength. You are going to need it.

Amen