

Reading Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* in The Age of Trump

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Abstract: Philip Roth's novel *The Plot Against America* (2004) is an alternate history in which the famous aviator Charles Lindbergh becomes President of the United States in 1940, defeating Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and signs non-aggression pacts with Germany and Japan to keep America out of World War II. The situation becomes increasingly difficult for America's Jews, represented in the novel by the family of Philip Roth in Newark, New Jersey. *The Plot Against America* is a profound commentary on the fluid nature of history and the relationship of the Jews to history, both past, present, and future. When *The Plot Against America* appeared in 2004, many read it, despite Roth's disavowals, as employing the imagined Presidency of Lindbergh as a not-so-veiled critique of the administration of then President George W. Bush. Now *The Plot Against America* is read instead as eerily prescient of the Presidency of Donald Trump. Again, Roth denies the parallels because, although both Lindbergh and Trump are bigots and white supremacists, he says Lindbergh was a genuine American hero because of his pioneering exploits in aviation whereas Trump is just a shallow conman. But a closer examination reveals that Trump, like Lindbergh, is an authoritarian with fascist leanings and deeply anti-Semitic. We can be grateful to Philip Roth for having provided us with a fictional model for the struggle against fascism in America.

Key Words: alternate history; anti-Semitism; Charles Lindbergh; fascism

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标题：特朗普时代下的《反美阴谋》解读

内容摘要：菲利普·罗斯的小说《范美阴谋》是一个虚构故事，故事讲述了著名飞行员查尔斯·林德伯格在 1940 年美国大选中击败了富兰克林·德拉诺·罗斯福而成为了美国第三十二任总统，同时与德国、日本签下了互不侵犯条约，从而得以让美国置身于第二次世界大战以外。菲利普·罗斯在小说中呈现了其在新泽西州纽瓦克市的家庭，反映了美国的犹太人境况每日愈下。《反美阴谋》是对历史的流变本质和犹太人与过去、现在及未来关系的一次深刻批评。当《反美阴谋》2004 年面世时，许多人认为它是罗斯运用想象的林德伯格当政明目张胆地批判当时的乔治·小布什政府，尽管对此罗斯本人予以否认。如今，《反美阴谋》被认为是对唐纳德·特朗普当政的出奇的先见之明。罗斯再一次否认了此种并联，尽管林德伯格和特朗普都是偏执狂和白人至上主义者，但是，他认为林德伯格因其在航空史上的先锋壮举是一位真正的美国英雄，然而特朗普仅仅是一个肤浅的骗子。可是，仔细审查读者还可发现，特朗普如同林德伯格一样，是一个具有法西斯倾向的独裁者并且有着深深的反犹情绪。我们应该感谢菲利普·罗斯，他给我们提供了一个虚构模式借以反抗美国的法西斯主义。

关键词：虚构历史；反犹主义；查尔斯·林德伯格；法西斯主义

作者简介：安德鲁·M. 戈登，加州大学伯克利分校英语系博士。一直以来，在美国佛罗里达大学讲授美国文学，并作为富布莱特学者赴西班牙、葡萄牙和塞尔维亚讲学。他曾作为访问学者到匈牙利、俄罗斯和阿根廷游学，并受邀赴欧洲、埃及、韩国、日本和中国讲学。他独撰出版了《一位美国梦想家：诺曼·梅勒小说心理分析的研究》和《梦想帝国：斯蒂芬·斯皮尔伯格的科幻和幻想电影》，与埃尔南·维拉合著出版了《屏幕的救世主：好莱坞小说的白人性》，与皮特·鲁德尼茨基合编了《精神分析 / 女权主义》。此外，他在美国犹太文学、美国科幻小说和美国科幻电影领域发表了 100 余篇论文和 50 余篇评论。

Introduction

"Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear," is the opening line of Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004). And perpetual fear seems to be the presiding emotion over half the American populace in the nightmare age of Trump. The novels most relevant to the present administration are all dark and dystopian: George Orwell's newly bestselling *1984* (1949), or Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), or alternate histories which posit the coming of fascism

to the United States in the twentieth century, like Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), and Roth's *The Plot Against America*. The novels by Atwood and Dick have been adapted for current American television series. The novels by Lewis, Dick, and Roth are counterfactuals which imagine a right turn in the 1930s or 1940s which transforms the United States into a fascist dictatorship. All three novelists expose a brutal, intolerant, authoritarian strain which has always been an undercurrent in American history and extrapolate that tendency in a fictional thought experiment.

In *The Plot Against America*, Roth, as an adult narrator feigning his supposed memoir from ages 7 to 9, from 1940 to 1942, imagines the United States after the election of the famous aviator Charles A. Lindbergh, who defeats Franklin D. Roosevelt's run for a third term and becomes President in 1940 on an isolationist, anti-war, and anti-Semitic platform. The U.S. does not enter the war but signs non-aggression pacts with the Axis powers of Germany and Japan. Things grow increasingly painful for the Roth family of Newark, New Jersey, as they conflict with one another over how to deal with the new and increasingly troubling circumstances for Jews in America: collaborate, resist, or flee to Canada? Roth writes in *The Plot Against America* about Jews in a precarious situation, facing the perennial crisis of Jews throughout history: they are not welcome and fear being expelled or exterminated. They face fascism with a smiling face until anti-Semitic mob violence and murderous pogroms explode toward the end. *The Plot Against America* won the Sidewise Award presented annually for the best novel of alternate history.

It is not surprising that Philip Roth, with his tendency toward satire and fantasy, might turn toward alternate history (AH). After all, Roth had already imagined a man turning into a breast (*The Breast* [1972]), a grotesque professional baseball league that never existed (*The Great American Novel* [1973]), Franz Kafka becoming a Hebrew teacher in New Jersey ("I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting"; or, Looking at Kafka," *Reading Myself* [1976]), and two Philip Roths meeting in Israel (*Operation Shylock* [1993]). It makes sense that the man who created Zuckerman's fantasy about an alternate Anne Frank who survived the Holocaust and went to America under an assumed name (*The Ghost Writer* [1979]), that the author of *The Counterlife* (1986) might write a counterfactual history of an isolationist America in 1940-42 under the administration of President Charles Lindbergh.

Philip Roth and History

According to E.L Doctorow, "history is a kind of fiction in which we live and hope

to survive, and fiction is a kind of speculative history, perhaps a superhistory” (“False Documents” 25). Philip Roth has always been fascinated by history and the Jews, or what history does to the Jews. Judaism is a religion with a very long history, and the Jews, as “the chosen people” perpetually awaiting the messiah, feel they have a special relationship with history and have always been obsessed with history. The twentieth century in particular, which encompassed massive immigration from Eastern Europe to the United States, the Holocaust, and the creation of the state of Israel, was monumental for Jewish history. As Roth writes, the Jews were “created and undone a hundred times over” in the twentieth century (“Imagining Jews,” *Reading Myself*). *The Plot Against America* is a profound commentary on the fluid nature of history and the relationship of the Jews to history, both past, present, and future. But if history shapes the Jews, fiction is also capable of reshaping history.

The subgenre of fantasy and science fiction, the counterfactual novel or alternate history, is an especially powerful form of superhistory, a means of speculating on and reconceiving history, showing both the imaginative power of fiction and the contingent nature of history. “The alternate history is a text placed at the crux of temporality, narrativity, and history; these three points engage in a dialogue that. . . questions these topics by estranging them, by changing events or interpretations to make them unfamiliar” (Hellekson 65). Part of the pleasure in reading AH is measuring the created world against known history and noting the deviations. Thus *The Plot Against America* ends with an appendix summarizing the real characters and true history of the time.

Alternate history, also called uchronia or allohistory, derives from the universal human tendency to speculate about the random and arbitrary nature of existence, and about how our lives might be dramatically altered if one small event in the past were to change. We do it to congratulate ourselves on our good fortune, to express our fear of the huge role chance plays in human existence, to express our fears about the present, or to wish that our lives had gone otherwise. Alternate history simply extends that tendency from rethinking one’s own history to reimagining entire eras of history. It comes in three varieties: the anomaly, where the altered history is simply given, as in *The Man in the High Castle* and *The Plot Against America*; the time travel deviation, as in Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889) or the movie trilogy *Back to the Future* (1985, 1989, 1990); or the parallel worlds scenario, as in the television series *Sliders* (1995-2000).

Why did Roth choose to write this alternate history, to flirt with the notion of

an American Holocaust only to return things to normal at the end? I think it was to demonstrate that the history books are only fictions and that the imaginative truths of fiction may constitute a superior history, or what Doctorow would term “a superhistory.” The historical events that occur in *The Plot Against America*, because they never happened, are as unforeseen by the reader as they are by the characters, so that we experience in reading some of the same shock they do — or that real people do as they are confronted with the unexpected, with history as it is happening. Roth would not have had created the same shock effect if he had written about events that were already historically fixed and well known.

Beginning with his American trilogy, Roth conducted a deep investigation into the nature and patterns of American history and the relationship of the individual to that history. *The Plot Against America* continued the investigation. Roth describes *The Plot Against America* as “an exercise in historical imagination. . . .” (Roth, “The Story”). For Roth’s heroes, American history is not a smooth and inevitable chain of events as in the history books; instead it is a disaster, sudden, accidental and terrible, hitting them when they are totally unprepared. Writes Roth, “History claims everybody, whether they know it or not and whether they like it or not. . . . We are ambushed, even as free Americans in a powerful republic armed to the teeth, by the unpredictability that is history. . . .” (Roth, “The Story”). In *American Pastoral*, Swede Levov, a prosperous Jewish American businessman whose daughter becomes a terrorist bomber to protest the Vietnam War, discovers that after the bombing he is “fettered to history, an instrument of history” (*American Pastoral* 5). “History, American history, the stuff you read about in books and study in school, had made its way out to tranquil, untrafficked Old Rimrock, New Jersey. . . . People think of history in the long term, but history, in fact, is a very sudden thing” (87). The Swede, whose life was all carefully planned out well in advance, a series of successful steps, cannot deal with the unforeseen disaster that is history. “He could never root out the unexpected thing. The unexpected thing would be waiting there unseen, for the rest of his life ripening, ready to explode, just a millimeter behind everything else. The unexpected thing was the other *side* of everything else” (176).

In *The Human Stain*, Coleman Silk too thinks he has escaped history, but is nonetheless finally caught in “the stranglehold of history that is one’s own time. Blindsided by the terrifyingly provisional nature of everything” (*Human Stain* 336). And in *The Plot Against America*, little Philip, the protagonist, sees his father fall apart and cry “because he was powerless to stop the unforeseen. And as Lindbergh’s election couldn’t have made clearer to me, the unfolding of the unforeseen was

everything. Turned wrong way around, the unfolding of the unforeseen was what we schoolchildren studied as 'History,' harmless history, where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable. The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic" (*Plot* 113-14). Commenting on *The Plot Against America* and his other novels about American history, Roth says, "In writing these books, I've tried to turn the epic back into the disaster as it was suffered without foreknowledge, without preparation, by people whose American expectations, though neither innocent nor delusional, were for something very different from what they got" (Roth, "The Story").

As early as the 1970s, Roth started to tap into "the emergence [in the 1960's] of a counter-history, or *countermythology*, to challenge the mythic sense of itself the country had. . . the *struggle* between the benign national myth of itself that a great power prefers to perpetuate, and the relentlessly insidious, very nearly demonic reality. . . ." (*Reading Myself* 89-90). Underneath the mythic notion of America as a tolerant melting pot is the undeniable, demonic reality of America as an empire built on white supremacy, slavery, and genocide. Alternate history is a powerful way to privilege the minority view of American history, to write "a counter-history, or *countermythology*," as in African-American Octavia Butler's time-travel fantasy about slavery, *Kindred* (1979), or the Jewish-American Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*.

Philip Roth on *The Plot Against America*

When *The Plot Against America* appeared in 2004, many read it, despite Roth's disavowals, as employing the imagined Presidency of Charles A. Lindbergh as a not-so-veiled critique of the administration of then President George W. Bush. One can understand why Roth would resist such a reading; he critiques W. in his novel *Exit Ghost* (2007), but that was not his primary intention in *The Plot Against America*, which was to show the potential for an American holocaust because of the blatant anti-Semitism already present in America in the 1930s. "It also gave me an opportunity to bring my parents back from the grave and restore them to what they were at the height of their powers. . . . I've tried to portray them here as faithfully as I could -- as though I were, in fact, writing nonfiction. . . . The writing, then, put me in touch with my dead parents no less than with the period, and in touch eventually with the kind of little boy I myself was, because I've tried to portray him faithfully too." Roth writes, "Some readers are going to want to take this book as a roman a clef to the present moment in America. That would be a mistake. I set out to do exactly what I've done: reconstruct the years 1940-

42 as they might have been if Lindbergh, instead of Roosevelt, had been elected president My every imaginative effort was directed toward making the effect of that reality as strong as I could, and not so as to illuminate the present through the past but to illuminate the past through the past.” And he mentions the use that Czech writers made of the works of Kafka to oppose the Communist regime in the 1960’s and 1970’s. “Literature is put to all kinds of uses, public and private, but one oughtn’t to confuse those uses with the hard-won reality that an author has succeeded in realizing in a work of art” (Roth, “The Story”). But great works of art are suggestive and lasting and can inspire new readings as times change. As Timothy Parrish writes, “Yet, as Roth acknowledges, a truly powerful novel sometimes has the gift of prophecy since it provides a framework by which future readers can orient themselves within their contemporary experience” (Parrish 159). Thus Orwell’s 1984 is a realistic fiction, a monument to its author’s creative imagination about a potential, frightening alternate history that nonetheless gives us a vocabulary about the operations of an authoritarian regime, so as “to illuminate the present.”

Does *The Plot Against America* Predict the Presidency of Trump?

In a similar fashion, *The Plot Against America* can be read today as a brilliantly prescient work anticipating the reign of Donald Trump. Both Lindbergh and Trump are celebrities who had never held political office before running for President. Both depended on their money and name recognition, on promoting “America First,” on populist appeals, and on galvanizing white supremacists. Both expressed admiration for foreign dictators. Both triumphed through charisma, big, simpleminded promises, and attacks on minorities.

According to one critic, “It would be an exaggeration to say that Philip Roth predicted the presidency of Donald Trump. But in 2004’s *The Plot Against America*, our greatest living novelist foresaw, in startling granular detail, how a demagogic celebrity like Trump *could* come to power” (Galupo). First is underestimating the candidate by considering him a joke. Yet both Lindbergh and Trump rapidly defeated their Republican rivals and then beat their Democratic opponent. “The second precondition is overestimation: an overestimation by the political establishment of its own mastery over the borders of permissible rhetoric. Trump scapegoated Muslims and Mexicans on his way to the White House. In an infamous speech in Des Moines, Iowa, Lindbergh scapegoated ‘the Jewish people’ or, alternatively, ‘the Jewish race.’” Both were denounced for their racist rhetoric, but their supporters approved. “As it so often does in Trump’s America,

establishment condemnation, in Roth's fiction, falls on deaf ears." Both Lindbergh and Trump ran unconventional campaigns that the establishment disdained but the media delighted in (radio in 1940; television and social media in 2016). Lindbergh "speaks in language that is 'unadorned and to the point.' He is unpredictable even to the 'professionals who had been assigned by the Republican Party to steer the political novice through his first political campaign...'" (Galupo) In all these respects, Trump mimics Roth's Lindbergh.

Even while the 2016 Presidential campaign was underway, one commentator, Mark Bresnan, wrote that *The Plot Against America* "is now impossible to see outside of the shadow of Donald Trump. Like Lindbergh, Trump has used his celebrity and wealth — and a private plane! — to triumph over a hopelessly fractured Republican party." Bresnan notes that "Trump and Lindbergh share an isolationist ethos that bleeds into ethno-nationalism." Lindbergh's speeches scapegoated the Jews and Great Britain; Trump's xenophobia is against Mexican immigrants, Muslims, and China. "Trump wants to make America great again, while Lindbergh wants to keep America out of the Jewish war; both see themselves as dealmakers that will achieve their goals through sheer force of personality." Just as Lindbergh legitimized the use of violence by white nationalists against the Jews, so "Trump's signals to his supporters are equally clear: use violence if necessary to expel protestors from rallies; blame Muslims and Mexicans for all of the United States's shortcomings; celebrate power and authority over consensus and negotiation. His name has been invoked as a taunt against minorities at high school sporting events, as an accompaniment to a swastika in the vandalism of a Northwestern University chapel, and in the assault of two students — one Muslim, the other Hispanic — at Wichita State University. . . .his success has exposed a sizable bloc of American voters willing to embrace his unapologetic mix of ethno-nationalism, authoritarianism, and transparent egoism." Bresnan concludes that we need to abandon the myth of American history as an inevitable progress toward tolerance and equality. Instead, "we Americans need to start telling ourselves a different story, one in which the prevalence of virulent racism and the latent appeal of fascist authoritarianism are not the stuff of alternate history but enduring elements of public life" (Bresnan). In other words, we must accept the sort of counter-history or countermythology that Roth proposed in his fiction.

Soon after the election, Judith Thurman enumerated the many parallels between Lindbergh and Trump: "The historical Lindbergh was an isolationist who espoused a catchphrase that Donald Trump borrowed for his Presidential campaign, and for his Inaugural Address: 'America First.' The fictional Lindbergh,

like the actual Trump, expressed admiration for a murderous European dictator, and his election emboldened xenophobes. In Roth's novel, a foreign power — Nazi Germany — meddles in an American election, leading to a theory that the President is being blackmailed. In real life, U.S. intelligence agencies are investigating Trump's ties to Vladimir Putin and the possibility that a dossier of secret information — *kompromat* — gives Russia leverage with his regime. . . . Many passages in *The Plot Against America* echo feelings voiced today by vulnerable Americans — immigrants and minorities as alarmed by Trump's election as the Jews of Newark are frightened by Lindbergh's. The book also chronicles their impulse of denial" (Thurman).

When Thurman asked Roth if it has happened here, he responded, "It is easier to comprehend the election of an imaginary President like Charles Lindbergh than an actual President like Donald Trump. Lindbergh, despite his Nazi sympathies and racist proclivities, was a great aviation hero who had displayed tremendous physical courage and aeronautical genius. . . . He had character and he had substance Trump is just a con artist. The relevant book about Trump's American forebear is Herman Melville's 'The Confidence-Man,' the darkly pessimistic, daringly inventive novel — Melville's last — that could just as well have been called 'The Art of the Scam'" (Roth, quoted by Thurman).

Roth, born in 1933, describes himself as a lifelong Roosevelt Democrat. He says, "I found much that was alarming about being a citizen during the tenures of Richard Nixon and George W. Bush. But, whatever I may have seen as their limitations of character or intellect, neither was anything like as humanly impoverished as Trump is: ignorant of government, of history, of science, of philosophy, of art, incapable of expressing or recognizing subtlety or nuance, destitute of all decency, and wielding a vocabulary of seventy-seven words that is better called Jerkish than English" (Roth, quoted by Thurman). Elsewhere, he has compared Trump to "the ominously ridiculous commedia dell'arte figure of the boastful buffoon" and called him "a massive fraud, the evil sum of his deficiencies, devoid of everything but the hollow ideology of a megalomaniac" (Roth, quoted by McGrath 16).

Roth insisted, "My novel wasn't written as a warning. . . . As for how Trump threatens us, I would say that, like the anxious and fear-ridden families in my book, what is most terrifying is that he makes any and everything possible, including, of course, the nuclear catastrophe" (Roth, quoted by Thurman). The election of Trump was so shocking and unforeseen, so unexpected in the polls and inspiring abject terror in millions of Americans, that it was immediately viewed as a kind of strange

horror show, an alternate reality. Damien Love reviewed the inauguration of Trump in the television section of a Scottish newspaper, as if it were a creepy revival of the old science fiction and fantasy TV show *The Twilight Zone*:

“this huge interactive virtual reality project, which will unfold on TV, in the press, and on Twitter over the next four years, sets out to build an ongoing alternative present. The story begins in a nightmarish version of 2017 in which huge sections of the US electorate have somehow been duped into voting to make Donald Trump president. It sounds far-fetched, and it is, but as it goes on it becomes more and more chillingly plausible. Today’s feature-length opener concentrates on the gaudy inauguration of President Trump, and the stirrings of protest and despair surrounding the ceremony, while pundits speculate gravely on what lies ahead. It’s a flawed piece, but a disturbing glimpse of the horrors we could stumble into, if we’re not careful.” (Stolworthy)

Another critic, Robert Kuttner, took Trump more seriously, writing, “The fascism now approaching is far from friendly. After decades of assault American democracy is far more fragile and impaired than we assumed. In Roth’s fictional America under Lindbergh in 1942, there is still a free press, though he does describe the assassination of a leading media critic. Trump, by contrast, is assassinating the difference between fact and lie in the entire media, and to an appalling degree he is getting away with it. . . .”

How Anti-Semitic is Trump?

Yet do we face a plot against the Jews? How anti-Semitic is Trump, who claims to be the “least anti-Semitic person that you’ve ever seen in your entire life.” Despite his assertion, Trump’s supporters include white supremacists and American neo-Nazis, homegrown fascists. Such bigots are xenophobes, equal-opportunity haters who despise all minorities, whether Muslim, Mexican, black, gay, or Jewish. In a rally in Phoenix in March 2017, hundreds of locals, including heavily armed militamen, white nationalists and even a few elected officials, gathered to support the 45th president. Trump supporters called for “liberal genocide” and “deportation of Jews” (Rosenmann). Trump did not denounce the rally.

Fred Trump, Trump’s father, was arrested in 1927 in a violent rally of the Ku Klux Klan (Bump). Trump himself, while not a KKK member, has nevertheless refused to condemn the Klan, many of whom are Trump followers. In the 1970s the FBI investigated alleged racial discrimination in the rental of apartments

from President Donald Trump's real estate company. The final agreement in 1975 "contained no admission of wrongdoing, but required the Trump firm to institute a series of safeguards to make sure apartments were rented without regard to race, color, religion, sex or national origin" (Gerstein).

Trump is a garden-variety racist who trades in crude, ignorant stereotyping of minorities. About immigrants from Mexico, he said, "They are not our friend, believe me. . . . They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists," adding, with the offhand denial of the racist, "And some, I assume, are good people" (Reilly). Trump reportedly stated that all Haitians have AIDS and all Nigerians live in huts (Njoroge). He refused to protect immigrants from Haiti, El Salvador, and Africa, saying "Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?" (Cohen). John O'Donnell, president of Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino in Atlantic City, said Trump blamed blacks for his financial problems. 'I've got black accountants at Trump Castle and at Trump Plaza — black guys counting my money!' Trump said, according to O'Donnell..... 'Laziness is a trait in blacks'" (Fisher). He paid for full-page newspaper ads calling for the death penalty for the Central Park Five, a group of black and Hispanic teenagers falsely accused of attacking a white woman in the park, and never apologized to the men, even after they were exonerated and released after years in prison when the real attacker was found (Lim). He rose to political popularity by spreading "birther" nonsense about Obama, and he tolerates and even cultivates bigots and white nationalists among his supporters and advisors.

Trump's stereotyping extends to Jews: he reportedly said, "'The only kind of people I want counting my money are short guys that wear yarmulkes every day'" (Fisher). In *The Plot Against America*, Lindbergh allies with notorious anti-Semites like Henry Ford and Burton K. Wheeler and invites Nazis to dinner at the White House. Yet at the same time he brings into his administration the devious Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf, whose purpose is "koshering Lindbergh for the goyim" (Plot 40), that is, rendering Lindbergh more acceptable to Christians by making him appear less rabidly anti-Semitic.

Trump's cover is his Jewish son-in-law Jared Kushner and the fact that daughter Ivanka is a convert to Judaism. But, as one commentator wrote, "That Trump's son-in-law and adviser Jared Kushner is Jewish should not in itself be of comfort; there were some Jews who worked with Hitler" (Ward). And, as another critic wrote, "History is filled with politicians who fomented anti-Semitism yet enjoyed warm relationships with individual Jews" (Beinart).

Trump is also a staunch supporter of Israel, or at least of the policies of

Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu, such as Trump's provocative move of declaring Jerusalem the capital, denying Palestinian claims to the same city, and stating his intention to relocate the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Nevertheless, such moves could be seen as playing not so much to American Jews as to Trump's base of white evangelical Christians, 81% of whom voted for him. White evangelicals believe that, according to biblical prophecy, the Jews' reclaiming Jerusalem will precede the conversion of the Jews and the second coming of Jesus, triggering the end times: their longed-for apocalypse (Butler Bass). Thus Trump's support of Israel has more to do with his hatred of Muslims (with the exception of America's long-time ally, the oil-rich monarchy of Saudi Arabia) and his desire to reward his white evangelical base than it does with philo-Semitism.

At the same time that he poses as a supporter of Israel, "He has placed individuals with ties to anti-Semitism into high public office — shattering a hard-won taboo against flagrant anti-Semitism in government. He has invigorated a white nationalist world-view that demonizes Jews, Muslims, and immigrants. He has, intentionally or not, energized white nationalists, neo-Nazis and a legion of alt-right internet trolls. His campaign and early presidency have been marred by anti-Semitic vandalism and threats. President Trump has downplayed these acts while ignoring the pattern he has set in motion. The issue of Trump and anti-Semitism keeps coming up because the president has embraced political figures whose conspiratorial and far-right ideologies are highly suspicious of — if not outright hostile to — Jews and Judaism. Regardless of whether President Trump personally holds such views, many people around him do" (Cotler). These include former members of the Trump administration including Mike Flynn, Sebastian Gorka, and Steve Bannon, as well as present members such as Jeff Sessions and Rick Perry, all of whom "have deep ties to fringe elements of the extreme Christian Right, the white nationalist alt-right, the European far right and the anti-immigration movement. These ties have played a key role in normalizing anti-Semitic bigotry and advancing political alliances with those who promote or are sympathetic to anti-Semitism. This is dangerous for the Jewish community but it is also perilous for immigrant communities, communities of color, and all religious minorities whose safety is jeopardized by white nationalism" (Cotler).

During his campaign, Trump retweeted hate messages from white supremacist sites, including one infamous image of Hillary Clinton over a pile of money featuring a red, six-pointed Jewish star with the message "Most Corrupt Candidate Ever!" The Trump campaign feebly defended the offensive image, saying it was a sheriff's star, and then tried to dampen the controversy by changing the star to a

circle. But this ignored the fact that “the image was previously featured on 8chan’s /pol/— an Internet message board for the alt-right, a digital movement of neo-Nazis, anti-Semites and white supremacists newly emboldened by the success of Trump’s rhetoric” (Smith).

After his inauguration, the White House failed to mention International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Next, Trump declined to attend the 2017 Passover seder at the White House. According to a Newsweek report, for some Jews, “Trump will be at the centerpiece of the annual retelling of the story of the Exodus—cast in the most unflattering light as the slaveholding villain” (Le Miere).

Next, the White House press secretary, Sean Spicer, was forced to apologize after he suggested that “Hitler had not used chemical weapons, ignoring the use of gas chambers at concentration camps during the Holocaust.” His remark “added to the perception that the Trump White House lacks sensitivity and has a tenuous grasp of history” (Fandos). Trump tried to make amends for this series of blunders by denouncing anti-Semitism and embracing Israel at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s National Day of Remembrance in April 2017 (Merica). But Bend The Arc Jewish Action, a nonprofit organization and political group, posted an open letter asking the Holocaust museum to disinvite the President. “President Trump’s administration has repeatedly insulted the memory of the Holocaust, and embraced the agenda and rhetoric of white nationalism and antisemitism,” the letter reads (Open Letter).

Bomb threats have been on the rise in the United States and Canada since January 2017, a fact some Jewish groups attribute to Trump’s campaign and presidency. “The number of anti-Semitic incidents across the country increased by 67 percent in the first three quarters of 2017 compared to the same time period in 2016. . . . The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) says in its latest ‘Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents’ that the number of assaults, acts of vandalism and violence against Jewish institutions between Jan. 1 and Sept. 30 totaled 1,299, compared to 779 over the same time last year” (Anti-Semitic Incidents).

Asked about the rise of anti-Jewish crimes since his election, Trump told an Orthodox Jewish reporter to “sit down” during a news conference in February 2017 before defending himself as “the least anti-Semitic person that you’ve ever seen in your entire life” and “The least racist person.” He accused the reporter of lying, and he referred to his great friendship with Benjamin Netanyahu, employing the always handy “some of my best friends are Jewish” disclaimer. But the reporter was not accusing Trump of anti-Semitism, only asking what he intended to do to stem the rise in anti-Jewish crimes. His anger and excessive defensiveness on the subject

might suggest an underlying guilt. Preposterously, Trump claimed that the anti-Semitic incidents originated not with his supporters but with his political opponents to anger people (Oppenheim).

The turning point in the opposition to Donald Trump's putative anti-Semitism came in August 2017, after a violent mob of white nationalists terrorized Charlottesville, Virginia, killing one person and wounded several others. Yet Trump refused to denounce the right-wing marchers, claiming to find a moral equivalence between neo-Nazis and those protesting the Nazis. At this point, prominent Jewish-American novelists Michael Chabon and Ayelet Waldman, a married couple, wrote an open letter:

“To our fellow Jews, in the United States, in Israel, and around the world: We know that, up to now, some of you have made an effort to reserve judgment on the question of whether or not President Donald Trump is an anti-Semite, and to give him the benefit of the doubt.”

After Charlottesville, however, claimed Chabon and Waldman, there was no longer any doubt: “the President expressed admiration and sympathy for a group of white supremacist demonstrators who marched through the streets of Charlottesville, flaunting Swastikas and openly chanting, along with vile racist slogans, ‘Jews will not replace us!’ Among those demonstrators, according to Trump, were ‘a lot’ of ‘innocent’ and ‘very fine people.’ . . .

“Any Jew, anywhere, who does not act to oppose President Donald Trump and his administration acts in favor of anti-Semitism; any Jew who does not condemn the President, directly and by name, for his racism, white supremacy, intolerance and Jew hatred, condones all of those things” (Chabon and Waldman).

The marchers in Charlottesville were chanting “Jews will not replace us!” because anti-Semitism is the engine of white supremacy: “in the White nationalist imaginary Jews are a race — the race — that presents a direct, existential threat to Whiteness. . . . Jews — despite and indeed because of the fact that they often read as White — are a different, unassimilable, enemy race that must be exposed, defeated, and ultimately eliminated” (Ward). The Jews, according to white nationalists, are the archenemy, Satan's spawn, a powerful international cabal who pass as white but actually conspire to bring down whiteness. Thus true whites vow not to be “replaced” by the insidious, false white Jews.

Yes, “Jews will not replace us,” and neither will “Happy Hannukah” replace “Merry Christmas.” During Christmas 2017, Trump, who often traffics in paranoid

conspiracy theories, revived talk of the bogus “War on Christmas” and claimed he had singlehandedly won the war and made it possible for Americans once again to say “Merry Christmas,” as if that had ever been an issue. Just as he blithely retweets hate messages from white supremacist sites, he seems unaware that talk of a supposed “War on Christmas” began in the 1920s in the notorious anti-Semitic tract *The International Jew: The World’s Foremost Problem*, first published in Henry Ford’s *The Dearborn Independent* from 1922-24 and then republished in four volumes sponsored by Ford. Henry Ford is cited in the first edition of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* (1925) (Denvir). And he is an influential member of the Lindbergh administration in *The Plot Against America*. “The War on Christmas” is one of Trump’s many “dog whistles” to American anti-Semites.

Another of Trump’s thinly disguised anti-Semitic slurs is the term “globalist,” which implies that Jews have no loyalty to the nation but conspire as internationalists to control global capital, similar to the infamous forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1903), which was used by the Nazis. Trump said of his outgoing director of the National Economic Council, Gary Cohn, who is Jewish, “He may be a globalist, but I still like him.” Trump was not using the term innocently, for one of his final 2016 campaign ads warned of “‘those who control the levers of power in Washington’ and the ‘global special interests’ and the ‘global power structure that is responsible for the economic decisions that have robbed our working class, stripped our country of its wealth.’ Besides Hillary Clinton, the ad featured images of only three recognizable Americans: the investor and philanthropist George Soros, Goldman Sachs Chairman Lloyd Blankfein, and then-Chair of the Federal Reserve Janet Yellen, all Jews” (Beinart). This is in line with his campaign’s borrowing of neo-Nazi imagery to show Hillary Clinton with a pile of money and a Jewish star, mentioned earlier, thus aligning Clinton, who is a Protestant, with the mythical conspiracy of international Jews to control and loot global capital. Trump thus traffics in classic, paranoid anti-Semitic imagery linking Jews with money.

Trump proves that one can have a Jewish son-in-law, a daughter converted to Judaism, be a staunch supporter of Israel, and yet still be an anti-Semite. In this fashion he can retain a modicum of Jewish support while still appealing to the mass of his followers, who range from polite anti-Semites to rabid neo-Nazis.

Differences Between the Fictional Lindbergh Presidency and the Real One of Trump

The fictitious Lindbergh presidency and the real one of Donald Trump of course deviate sharply at many points. The main discrepancy is that Trump

better resembles Roth's fictional portrait of the real-life gossip columnist Walter Winchell, who was Jewish, than the "golden goy" Charles Lindbergh. Lindbergh is an austere WASP whereas Winchell, who was a fierce anti-Nazi, becomes in the novel Lindbergh's chief public critic and later his opponent for the Presidential nomination. Although Winchell is the quintessential "loudmouth Jew," he resembles Trump: he is a media celebrity with an unstoppable mouth and gutter charm, a vulgar playboy who chases showgirls, a maverick, immoderate, and, above all, a self-promoter (260-61). When Winchell starts to run for President, the New York Times denounces "Winchell's 'self-serving shenanigans': 'there is nothing Walter Winchell has more talent for,' wrote the Times, 'than himself'" (261). Winchell's candidacy is short-lived, for "anti-Semitic agitators hunted Winchell down at every crossing" (264): he is first wounded by a mob in Boston and then assassinated during a speech in Louisville, a martyr to the cause of anti-fascism.

At the funeral, New York Mayor La Guardia admits that Winchell "was not a lovely human being. . . . He was not shy, he was not modest, he was not decorous, discreet, kindly, et cetera. . . . My friends, only a Charles A. Lindbergh has motives as pure as Ivory soap. . . ." But La Guardia goes on to state that because Walter was the enemy of the fascists and Lindbergh was "'a fascist sympathizer, more than likely an outright fascist. . . . Walter's vulgarity is something great, and Lindbergh's decorum is hideous'" (303-05). In *The Plot Against America*, as in his American trilogy and *The Dying Animal*, Roth opposes the falsity of decorum and purity to the honesty of indecorum and impurity. Donald Trump can be criticized for many things, but surely "decorum" is not one of them. In fact, Trump's loudmouth vulgarity is read by his followers not as crudity but as a sign of fearlessness and authenticity.

Conclusion

Nevertheless, *The Plot Against America*, which may have seemed like an oddity when it was published, now "feels horrifically prophetic – a warning that intolerance and populism are not historic quirks but aspects of the human condition against which society must be eternally vigilant" (Power). According to Richard Brody, "*The Plot Against America* is about how it can happen here; about how, if it were to happen here, American Jews and, for that matter, many other courageous Americans would rise up, organize, and resist; and about how their altogether American resistance against an altogether American abuse of power might nonetheless not suffice. . . . *The Plot Against America* dramatizes the American character as vast, manifold, and inchoate; it can use its prodigious and uninhibited energy for good or for evil, and it shifts under the sudden force of unforeseeable

events. The shifts and pivots of the American nation at large are also those of each individual American.”

We now face a real plot against America, one that will not be so easy to defeat but that we must resist with all our power. According to Robert Kuttner, “Trump is far more of a menace than Roth’s invented Lindbergh. Getting rid of him will take strategic focus, courage, and no small measure of luck. . . .” But we can be grateful to Philip Roth for having provided us with a fictional model for the struggle against fascism in America.

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