

## BOOKS

[*The Plot Against America*,  
Philip Roth, Houghton Mifflin,  
400 pages]

# Heil to the Chief

By Bill Kauffman

PHILIP ROTH'S *The Plot Against America* is the novel that a neoconservative would write, if a neoconservative could write a novel.

In 1940, as in 2004, voters faced a choiceless presidential election between pro-war interventionists, with a noble antiwar socialist (Norman Thomas then, Ralph Nader now) the best man in the field.

In Roth's what-if world, we the people have an actual choice in 1940. Instead of a third term for President Franklin D. Roosevelt, America Firster Charles Lindbergh is elected president, whereupon all hell breaks loose—which is to say America is at peace, a condition never again to be permitted, apparently, in the United States of Armaments. The horrific consequences of electing an antiwar Midwesterner are seen through the eyes of young Philip Roth, son of an insurance agent, and his Jewish family in Newark, New Jersey.

In our world, Wall Street operatives steered the 1940 GOP nomination to the hawkish utilities executive Wendell Willkie, as Gore Vidal describes with wit, artistry, and panache in *The Golden Age* (2000). That novel also pivots on the 1940 election, although Vidal regards Lindbergh as “the true white knight through and through,” and “the best that we are ever apt to produce in the hero line, American style.”

Vidal is a proprietary patriot, utterly comfortable with our history because it is his history. Roth is ill at ease in the American past; his research seems to

have consisted of a quick flip through the courtier histories of James MacGregor Burns and Arthur Schlesinger. He bristles with contempt for the benighted denizens of “the working-class heartland of isolationist America”—that is, mothers and fathers who would rather not send their boys to die in foreign wars. Their parochial and pacific instincts point the way to a Middle American fascism.

Roth writes in sodden clichés: for instance, FDR “inspired millions of ordinary families like ours to remain hopeful in the midst of hardship.” This is Time-Life prose. There is not a felicitous sentence in this book; nor is there a spark of wit or a single subversive thought. The literary critics of the Department of Homeland Security will pronounce it fit for best-sellerdom.

Charles A. Lindbergh was a classic product of Upper Midwest populism. His congressman father, a fierce foe of U.S. involvement in World War I, was dubbed the “Gopher Bolshevik” by the *New York Times*. Lindbergh is easily understood in a Minnesota tradition that stretches from the Gopher Bolshevik and Sen. Henrik Shipstead through Bob Dylan and Eugene McCarthy. He was no more a Nazi than FDR was.

But not since the Spanish-American War have honorable Americans been permitted to criticize a war without being slandered as traitorous lackeys for the enemy. Just as Eugene V. Debs was

*The Plot Against America* is the sort of novel a bootlicking author might write to curry favor with a totalitarian government. The author puts a fictive gloss over the officially sanctioned history. Thank God things happened as they did! The alternative to the regime was madness, chaos, murder. Dissenters must be demonized, so Roth saddles his America First villains with positions exactly opposite those they actually took.

The America First Committee was the largest (800,000 members) antiwar organization in U.S. history. Its members ranged from patricians to populists, from Main Street Republicans to prairie socialists. John F. Kennedy was a donor; his future brother-in-law Sargent Shriver was a founder, as were Gerald Ford, Potter Stewart, and Kingman Brewster. Many of the finest writers in America sympathized with (or joined) America First—Sinclair Lewis, Edmund Wilson, Robinson Jeffers, e.e. cummings, and William Saroyan—while the leading pro-war authors were such toadies as Archibald MacLeish (or macarchibald maclapdog macleish, as cummings called him). Aviator Lindbergh was the AFC's most popular speaker, though he never formally joined the committee.

The antiwar movement of 1940-41 was essentially libertarian: in favor of peace and civil liberties, opposed to conscription. Rather than accept this complexity, Roth opts for inversion: his iso-

AMERICA FIRSTER **CHARLES LINDBERGH IS ELECTED PRESIDENT**, WHEREUPON  
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calumniated as a Kaiser-lover and Martin Luther King Jr. as a communist, so must Charles Lindbergh be a crypto-Nazi. Given the current climate, Roth's book is especially odious. Or perhaps *The Plot Against America* is meant to serve as the writing sample in Roth's application for a speechwriter job in the Bush administration.

lutionists are the party of repression and conscription, while his warhawks are the party of liberty. War is Peace. Freedom is Slavery.

And so Montana Senator Burton K. Wheeler, running mate of “Fighting Bob” La Follette on the 1924 Progressive Party ticket and an early supporter of the New Deal who went into opposition

over FDR's attempt to pack the Supreme Court, emerges as Lindbergh's wicked vice president, a despoiler of the Constitution and declarer of martial law. Never mind that the real Burton K. Wheeler was an anti-draft, antiwar, anti-big business defender of civil liberties: in Roth's world, this great American—a "brilliant, incorruptible, courageous man," in La Follette's glowing tribute—must be depicted as pro-fascist. (The closest thing to a real live fascist in American politics in 1940 was FDR brain-truster Rexford G. Tugwell.) Vice President Wheeler is portrayed as a "combative" snarler whose job is to "attack and revile" foes—a role actually played by Rothian hero Harold Ickes, the FDR hatchetman so memorably described by Clare Boothe Luce as having "the soul of a meat axe and the mind of a commissar."

Roth's Lindbergh is laconic to the point of simplemindedness. The real Lindy was a fine writer who composed his own speeches, but Roth suggests that these were written in Germany. The Lindbergh of *The Plot Against America* declares, "My intention in running for the presidency is to preserve American democracy by preventing America from taking part in another world war. Your choice is simple. It's not between Charles A. Lindbergh and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. It's between Lindbergh and war." This is an eminently fair summation. But of course the American people were presented no such choice in 1940, nor really in any other quadrennium since World War II except, perhaps, 1972.

The Lindbergh nomination is engineered by North Dakota Sen. Gerald P. Nye, whom Roth dismisses with the lazy

adjective "right-wing." Oh really? In fact, Nye criticized the New Deal from the Left for its timorousness. Nye had made his name as the scourge of the "merchants of death" who profited from the disastrous U.S. entry into the First World War, and he always feared a replay.

Campaigning in "the remotest rural counties," Lindbergh wins in a landslide, the Republicans take Congress, and the threat of peace, no conscription, and full enjoyment of the Bill of Rights darkens the Rothian sky. To young Philip's parents, America is good only insofar as it sends its sons to die in foreign lands. The family's favorite presidents are Wilson and FDR, who shipped more Americans to die overseas than any other chief execs. Unwashed Americans, who live in places like North Dakota or Minnesota or Montana, mean

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harm to the Roths; their reluctance to send their sons to transatlantic graves is presented as a particularly insidious symptom of anti-Semitism.

In Roth's flip-flopped universe, President Lindbergh institutes a peacetime draft—which in fact FDR did, over the ardent objections of the isolationists, who argued against conscription on libertarian grounds.

President Lindbergh cozies up to the Nazis while pursuing a domestic policy that might be stamped "Made in Germany." He is wildly popular, even with "the highly assimilated upper echelon of German Jewish society," whose cultured members are depicted herein as craven social climbers.

Among the turncoat Jews is Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf of Newark, a South Carolina native with a "courtly Southern accent"—always the tip-off to knavery when a mediocrity is at the typewriter. The Rabbi opposes women's suffrage, not exactly a hot topic in 1940, but then Roth is limning character, don't you see? The scene in which Rabbi Bengelsdorf vivisects FDR's Scottie Fala must have been excised by a wise editor.

### TO ROTH, A SMALL FARM IN KENTUCKY IS THE PERFECT TRAINING GROUND FOR A FASCIST. TELL IT TO WENDELL BERRY, PHILIP.

Lindbergh and Rabbi Bengelsdorf create an Office of American Absorption, whose centerpiece is the "Just Folks" program, under which Jewish youth are shipped out to the "Gentile heartland" to become real Amerrykuns. Philip's brother spends the summer with a "Kentucky tobacco farmer." He returns with an accent, respect for farm life, a taste for ham and bacon, and a dose of the fascist clap that Philip Roth imagines lurks everywhere in that darksome forest of fear west of the Hudson. To Roth, a small farm in Kentucky is the perfect training ground for a fascist. Tell it to Wendell Berry, Philip.

"Just Folks" is yet another Roth reversal: FDR's Civilian Conservation Corps

was the actual (if benign) means of rustifying urban boys in the 1930s. In the 1940s, it was urban politicians who tore rural boys from their native ground and sent them to war. The dislocating effects of militarism meant that 15 million Americans lived in a different county in March 1945 than they had in December 1941—and that doesn't count the 12 million-plus in uniform. A disproportionate number of the displaced, by the way, were from Kentucky. As an anti-hillbilly joke of the time went, America lost three states in the early 1940s: Kentucky and Tennessee had gone to Indiana, and Indiana had gone to hell. But to Roth, the Gentile heartland is hell.

If *The Plot Against America* sounds like Roth's savage satire on Jewish paranoia, it is not. For the rural folk eventually run riot as a kind of cornfed, baccy-smokin' Khmer Rouge.

Under the Office of American Absorption, Metropolitan Life offers Philip's father a transfer to Danville, Kentucky. He refuses, probably because novelist Roth has no idea how to describe life in a Klan-Nazi hotbed like Kentucky, but it is in resisting relocation that the Roth

family attains a certain nobility. "A child of my background had a sixth sense in those days, the geographic sense, the sharp sense of where he lived and who and what surrounded him," writes Roth. The faces, the voices, the ejaculations (because, after all, this is Philip Roth): these people are Newark, and we are made to understand the enormity of their unmooring. Dislocation exacts a terrible human cost. A pity that Roth does not mind uprooting the hicks he so obviously hates—for war is the most pitiless uprooter of all.

In the real 1940-41, antiwar entertainers were blacklisted for daring to speak their minds. (The case of Lillian Gish was notably disgusting.) In Roth's

world, the pro-war radio gossip Walter Winchell is fired by Jergens Lotion when he denounces President Lindbergh. Winchell then declares his candidacy for president and barnstorms the black heart of America. He is baited and mocked in South Boston, Little Italy, and wherever papist brutes foregather. (In fact, it was America First speakers who were harassed in 1941, heckled by warhawks and denied permits in jingo towns.)

It is here that Roth's loathing of Catholicism, with its "witchy" nuns and "creepily morticianlike priests," reaches a fever-swamp pitch. Winchell's taunting of the antiwar wafer-eaters brings "the Lindbergh grotesquery to the surface." He is assaulted in South Boston and greeted with chants of "Kike Go Home!" in upstate New York, Pennsylvania, the Midwest—all sewers "notorious for their bigotry."

Working-class Catholics erupt in anti-Semitic riots in Detroit: "shops were looted and windows broken, Jews trapped outdoors were set upon and beaten, and kerosene-soaked crosses were ignited" on the lawns of Jewish homeowners. Jewish schools are bombed and synagogues trashed in America's first-ever pogrom. Anti-Jewish riots also break out in Cleveland, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, St. Louis, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Scranton, Akron, Syracuse—all across the hate-filled heartland, for the "menace of anti-Semitism" stretches "from one end of America to the other." Our heroes make a mad dash across "rural West Virginia," where "Ku Klux Klansmen had to be lying in wait for any Jew foolhardy enough to be driving through." Almost Heaven? Not in this book.

Walter Winchell is killed in Kentucky by "an American Nazi Party assassin working in collaboration with the Ku Klux Klan." Roth takes an especial scunner to poor Kentucky, his locus of American evil. A Jewish lady from Newark, exiled to Danville, is set upon by a mob of Klansmen, which is to say ordinary Kentuckians; she is beaten and burned to death in the state that provides "a

nightmarish vision of America's anti-Semitic fury." To add insult to fatal injury, her son, "the smartest kid in our class" in Newark, is "stunted" and mentally "stopped" by his exposure to the amenities of Kaintuck.

Coincidentally, I slogged through Roth right after reading three Kentucky novels: Berry's *Watch With Me* (1994), James Still's *River of Earth* (1940), and *The Time of Man* (1926) by Elizabeth Madox Roberts. Each is set within a decade or two of 1940. The characters are remarkably unlike Nazis, though perhaps Mr. Roth knows the true heart of Kentucky better than Kentuckians themselves.

The Winchell funeral is the winch that turns the cranks out of office. Lindy disappears in flight, probably a victim of the Nazis who orchestrated the antiwar movement all along. (Just as Saddam Hussein's hidden bank accounts are enriching today's peace movement.) Acting President Wheeler declares martial law—quite a trick for a civil libertarian to pull off—anti-Semitic riots stain America red with the blood of Jewish martyrs, till FDR comes out of retirement ... oh, I don't want to spoil the ending for you. Suffice to say that Roth, in his dotage, displays all the imagination of an assistant censor in the Office of War Information. Franklin D. retakes the White House and promptly gets us into the world war, wherein all those louts from Kentucky either die as fodder or walk tall as members of the Greatest Generation. All's well that ends well.

This is a repellent novel, bigoted and libelous of the dead, dripping with hatred of rural America, of Catholics, of any Middle American who has ever dared stand against the war machine. All that is left, I suppose, is for the author to collect his Presidential Medal of Freedom. ■

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*Bill Kauffman's most recent book is Dispatches from the Muckdog Gazette (Henry Holt/Picador). His earlier books include America First! Its History, Culture, and Politics and the novel Every Man a King.*

[*The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America*, John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, Penguin, 450 pages]

## Prometheus Unhinged

By Philip Gold

*The Right Nation* is far from a bad book. It is engaging, lucid, and in many ways instructive. The British take on us—authors John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge hail from the *Economist*—usually is. I've enjoyed British observations on American politics since encountering Bryce's 19th-century dictum that the Republicans and Democrats resemble two bottles of wine, each with fancy and detailed labels describing their contents, and each empty.

Had this book been released a little later, its title might have been *Where the Right Didn't Go Wrong*. Here we have the sunny-side-up take on conservatism's rise to power, culminating in the presidency of George W. Bush. But the authors' interpretation of this story and its meaning is flawed. The book has many minor but irritating errors of fact as well. Still it is worthwhile for what it reveals—sometimes unintentionally—about the nature of the conservative movement today.

Wooldridge and Micklethwait set themselves two goals. The first is to explain conservatism's half-century rise from a small clique of dour intellectuals, segregationists, and leftover enemies of FDR to its present status as America's *de facto* official creed, toward whose values and virtues all save the looniest of lefties are expected to aspire. The second objective is to explain the "exceptionalism" of American conservatism—why it is so utterly different from its European cousins. The authors answer both questions with a single adjective: Promethean. American conservatism is Promethean in that it rejects despair and limitation, embraces

(as FDR once put it) "strong and active faith," and earnestly believes that human beings, and indeed the human condition, can be improved, perhaps to the point of secular redemption.

That liberalism, not to mention Marxism, founded on exactly such a belief is one item among many that the authors carefully elide. No matter. American conservatism fits the basic American sensibility—an earthly, earthy optimism that holds that God is on the side of the big battalions, the small entrepreneurs, and just about anything America cares to do when it goes mucking about in the world.

The authors invoke Tocqueville to characterize conservatism's rise as "inevitable yet unforeseen." Noting correctly that American conservatism is based more on values than on class or economic status, and that it is a loose movement rather than a disciplined party or even a coherent worldview, they tell a goodly tale. This is "court history" written by sympathetic and observant outsiders. The vignettes and expositions are usually well presented, apt, and of value to the un- or under-initiated. Those who wonder what Grover Norquist does on Wednesday mornings or what think tanks do—or don't do—all day long will find their answers here. True, conservative experts and veterans will note the numerous small errors of fact that dot its narrative. Nonetheless, the book still tracks with the movement's basic sense of how it got where it is today.

Politically, this volume is about how America arrived at its present red state/blue state distribution from an earlier era of Democratic hegemony. The story unfolds from the ashes of defeat in 1964 to the "false dawn" of Richard Nixon and then, at last, the Reagan magnificence—ideological commitment without the personality baggage of the ideologue. And thence to George W., a man who manages to be, simultaneously, a True Believer and a conservative of convenience.

Culturally, the account follows a succession of rebellions and reaffirmations, conflicted and conflicting, that turned Trotskyites into neocons and