**The Vulnerability of Democracy**

Warnings Against Fascism in Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* and Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America*

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**Abstract**

This thesis analyzes some of the methods fascists have used to gain power in American democracy and how Americans responded to these methods as they have been represented in the alternative historical novels of *It Can’t Happen Here* and *The Plot Against America* set during the World War II period. Keeping in mind the realistic qualities that are thematized in Sinclair Lewis’s and Philip Roth’s cautionary tales, this study examines how *It Can’t Happen Here* and *The Plot Against America* identify the methods of manipulative populism, radicalization through binarization, and propaganda networks as tactics utilized by fascists to deceive Americans into voting them into power. This thesis will also examine the importance of proactivity and resistance as values under the threat of fascism.

The novels thematize the desperation, economic struggle, intolerance, and apathy that facilitate the rise of fascists and demagogues. These themes resonate with the socioeconomic climate of the non-fictional United States from the 1930s to the 1940s. Emphasizing America’s social atmosphere, I draw attention to the characterizations of the antagonists, protagonists, and supporting characters in Lewis’s and Roth’s books. In performing a close reading of their characters, their actions, and their real life counterparts, I aim to validate the authors’ concerns about how fascism can develop within the United States through democratic processes.

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**Introduction**

Sinclair Lewis and Philip Roth did not solely create fantastical reimaginations of a past America. They also created insightful political commentary that placed the social atmosphere of a historical period in a time capsule that resonates with contemporary issues. *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935) and *The Plot Against America* (2004) are both political fictions set during World War II. They explore an alternative timeline in which Franklin Delano Roosevelt loses the 1936 and 1940 US presidential election to a charismatic, deceptive politician.

*It Can’t Happen Here* follows the Jessups and their surrounding community to portray the ways in which fascism can appeal to the hopes and fears of common people. Doremus Jessup and his family are subjected to the rise of fascism in America. Doremus is a 60-year old newspaper owner who lives in Vermont. He, along with millions of other Americans, witness the ascension of Berzelius “Buzz” Windrip to presidency. Windrip promotes himself on a populist campaign and appeals to the “common man” – people like Doremus, with promises of wealth and a stark disproval of heavy-handed government authority. As Windrip gains control of the presidential office, however, he is revealed to be anything but what he promises; instead, he reveals himself to be a fascist dictator. But, for many, the revelation comes too late. He and his supporters turn America into a fascist, totalitarian regime. Yet, Doremus does not go down without a fight. He, and many characters like him, rebel against Windrip and the regimes that form after him. The novel ends with the message that “a Doremus Jessup can never die” (382). In this way, Lewis uses Doremus to signify the importance of proactive and resistant behavior against threats to democracy.

Similarly, *The Plot Against America*, which details an alternative history in which Charles Lindbergh wins the 1940 US election, is told from the perspective of a seven-year-old Philip Roth. Roth, and his family, are American Jews who are troubled by the increasingly antisemitic, pro-Nazi rhetoric peddled by Lindbergh as he grows in popularity. The child-like perspective of the narrative captures the sense of fear and helplessness that characterizes many of the characters in the novel who find themselves on the wrong end of Lindbergh’s plans for America. To this end, *It Can’t Happen Here* and *The Plot Against America* offer insightful political commentary about the ways in which democracy can be twisted and corroded to serve the intentions of bad actors. The authors do this by unveiling how bad actors can rise to power by manipulating democratic fundamentals. Thus, the plots of the novels make a point to detail how and why their fascist antagonists become presidents of the United States. The novelists sought to demonstrate that a close analysis of the methods by which fascist gain power is just as important as identifying someone as a fascist. The methods include manipulative populism, radical binarization, and the establishment of propaganda networks.

Both Lewis’s and Roth’s critiques of democracy are facilitated by the genre of their novels; they are both historical novels with alternative historical fictions and so they blend elements of historical truth telling and alternative plot lines. In doing so, the authors are able to explore the possible and unrealized repercussions of political extremism while also grounding their work enough to produce practical points.

Historical novels with alternative historical fictions are effective at experimenting with the past in meaningful ways. One way in which historical fictions do this is through recontextualizing the potential consequences of historical events by creating “what if” scenarios. Journalists Graeme Pente and Travis R. May suggests that historical novels can analyze history in ways that traditional reflections or discussions of historical events by scholars otherwise struggle to do. They write that historians “are constrained by available evidence and the parameters of what was,” while fiction gives way to discussing what might have been (Erstwhile). Historical novels with alternative fictions also provide readers a unique perspective on the past by telling stories from the eyes and voices of more common individuals rather than great figures.

The literary critic George Lukács asserts that one advantage of the historical novel its ability to tell narratives from “below.” These novels present a story about common individuals or a collective that can “directly and at the same time typically express the problems of an epoch” (284). Historical novels with a greater focus on relatable or common perspectives provide ways of thinking about historical events that are not centralized around popular figures. Compared to nonfictional accounts of history, historical novels are valuable because they “break the tendencies which make history private” (Lukács 282).

*The Plot Against America* and *It Can’t Happen Here* recontextualize WWII America to address problems of the past and issues that still arise in the modern day. In this thesis I will analyze how Lewis and Roth were doing more than just detailing what a potential fascist or dictator might look like. Despite the fact that both novels take place nearly a century ago, the novelists’ criticisms still remain relevant. I argue that examining the methods and themes of Lewis’s and Roth’s work helps us gain a better understanding of the insecurities of democracy in America.

**Section I: Setting the Stage**

**Historical Context**

Lewis’s and Roth’s creation of historical fictions demands a close examination of the tales they created and the reality they changed. The books are both set during the ‘30s to ‘40s, which was a pivotal time around the world. The Great Depression, World War II, the clash of political ideologies, and an interconnected global experience of trauma called for critical thinking about many aspects of life, among them was the sturdiness of democracy. There was both a general, global inquiry about democracy’s longevity, and a local one in the United States. The novelists provide critiques of democracy in regard to its vulnerability to fascism. Their evaluation is facilitated through fictional literature, yet their concerns are applicable to the real world. Following the Great Depression, some Americans believed that fascism was a worthy contender to democracy. As Roth once stated, “there were many of the seeds for [fascism] happening here, but it didn't” (New York Times). In discovering what those “seeds” were and why it’s important to understanding the real anxieties and responsibilities that the authors depict, I seek to offer a brief crash course on the important historical events that underlie the novels’ greater points.

**The Great Depression**

The authors use the Great Depression as a backdrop to their novels to portray how financial insecurity permits a vulnerability to populism and propaganda among people. Populists use people’s despairs and anxieties to elevate themselves socially and politically, so money is a valuable tool as populists can use it to buy someone’s support. Thereby, the significance of the Great Depression in the context of *It Can’t Happen Here* and *The Plot Against America* becomes apparent when considering the themes of wealth, economy, and their connections to populism.

In the United States, the recession had profound social and economic effects. The end of the Roaring Twenties would prove to be ruinous for many people around the world. At the end of the decade, the American stock market experienced its most historically catastrophic crash in what would be labeled the Wall Street Crash of 1929. Bank failures claimed the life savings of Americans across the nation. They were left impoverished. Jobs fired a great deal of people and those that were fortunate enough to keep their careers were subjected to wage cuts. Without work, a great number of people lost their houses. Dispossessed families and individuals sought shelter in the construction of large shantytowns referred to as Hoovervilles. Migrations occurred around the nation. Southerners moved up north, farmers left their lands, and people moved into “cities in search of work” (History). These mass migrations elevated the competition for work and escalated racial tensions. People could not comprehend the sudden disarray the nation fell into from the stock market crash. It was not long before they needed someone to hold accountable. “Blaming Wall Street speculators, bankers, and the Hoover administration, the rumblings of discontent grew mightily in the early 1930s” (Library of Congress).

Lewis and Roth capture this growing discontent to portray the despair that made people vulnerable to propaganda about economic prosperity, regardless of who made the propaganda. By 1932, the nation was growing desperate for a solution and some people believed in the assurances of powerful figures, even when their promises were unrealistic. Many Americans still could not find work and older individuals without employment were especially unlikely to find a job. Frustrations and tensions grew with each passing day. Riots broke out and marches occurred. People believed that President Herbert Hoover was not doing enough. While everyone waited for the depression to blow over, people began to consider alternative choices for leaders. Some Americans found respite in putting their faith in the federal government and the prospective Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Others sought more radical options.

The backdrop of the novels is the world’s most severe recession and puts into perspective the economic-driven desperation that persists throughout the novels’ plots. People put their faith into public or powerful figures to save them from economic turmoil, though as Roth and Lewis explore, sometimes this faith is offered to the wrong individuals. Americans looked towards FDR to spare the economy after believing Hoover had failed to do enough. But what happened to those that did not accept Roosevelt and sought extreme alternatives like Huey Long? With the promise of wealth and relief, Lewis and Roth suggest that people may look towards radical figures for liberation, despite the risks it can pose to democratic structures.

**Democracy and Fascism**

The novelists’ concerns about fascism using democratic processes to take root in America is embodied by the dichotomy between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Huey Long. FDR ushered in a new wave of hope for numerous Americans with a populist approach that assured economic revitalization in the States; yet, to some, his plans weren’t agreeable. Roosevelt won the 1932 US Presidential Election against Hoover by a landslide and, shortly after, implemented the New Deal. The New Deal promised economic relief and rejuvenation, and for many, it fulfilled this promise. “Almost every American found something to be pleased about and something to complain about in this motley collection of bills” (History). The president had prominent detractors who argued that his measures were not extreme enough, namely Huey Long. Though FDR was a populist, he was not a fascist. Long was also a populist, but his criticisms reflected the beliefs of an autocrat.

Lewis’s and Roth’s suggestions about how populism is weaponized for fascists is reflected in FDR’s and Long’s overlapping populist traits. Huey Long, the former Louisiana Senator, saw the New Deal as a failure because it showed restraint and control. He insisted that the Roosevelt administration did not completely mobilize “the power and resources of the federal government to address the issues of poverty and inequality” (Bill of Rights Institute). To counter the New Deal and FDR, Long started various social and economic plans with more radical solutions than FDR’s legislation. Glen Jeansonne, an American political historian, in a Louisiana journal, dissects Long’s populism to address the flaws of the senator’s unrealistic ambitions. Jeansonne discusses Long’s most notable initiative, which was the Share Our Wealth plan. The plan proposed “the confiscation of millionaire incomes and distribution of their fortunes among the masses” (Jeansonne 333). He also guaranteed every low-income family a $5,000 remittance and a minimum yearly income of $2,500. To people who were distressed from the depression, this was the dream of a lifetime. But Jeansonne highlights that Long’s plan suffered from not being economically feasible. Some economists pointed out the flaws at the time. Though their statements fell on Long’s deaf ears because his “impractical plan was more a political ploy than a program of reform” (336). Both, FDR and Long, used the populist appeals of economic reinvigoration to garner support. The difference was that FDR’s plans were reasonable and achievable, while Long’s were not.

This difference between FDR’s and Long’s plans only furthered Lewis’s concern as he would have witnessed the large number of American supporters for Long’s plans. In *It Can’t Happen Here*, he writes, “The conspicuous fault of the Jeffersonian Party […] was that it represented integrity and reason, in a year when the electorate hungered for frisky emotions” (85). The Jeffersonian party, in the novel, is a fictional organization started by Roosevelt. Lewis was observant of how people’s desires for extreme and immediate resolutions gave leverage to opportunists. In the real world, Roosevelt was also concerned about the power of Long’s populism. Jeansonne notes that Roosevelt orchestrated a poll which indicated that Long could split the votes of the Democratic party. To this, FDR called Long "one of the two most dangerous men in the country" (Jeansonne 335). The Louisiana senator knew how to appeal to the masses with promises of a utopia that they could vote for. He abused populism to obtain favorability among many Americans. It was this frightening reality that inspired Sinclair Lewis to express how populism can be manipulative.

Additionally, Lewis and Roth highlight that democracy faced its fair share of criticisms as people internationally, and within America, began to question its viability. Some of these people, particularly Americans, even began to believe in the fundamentals of fascism, communism, or alternatives to democracy. Around the globe, “infant democracies grew, toddled, wobbled, and fell: Hungary, Albania, Poland, Lithuania, Yugoslavia,” states a New York Times article (Lepore). To some Americans, the strength of democracy did not seem like enough to end the suffering brought on by the Great Depression. Democratic processes, in their eyes, were too slow and faced too much gridlock. They considered that FDR should “assume the powers of a dictator […] to avoid congressional obstructionism” (Lepore 433). Criticism arose against the president accusing him of already leaning towards dictatorship. Detractors and supporters of FDR questioned his Judicial Procedures Reform Bill of 1937. Frequently called the “court-packing plan,” the bill would grant the president the ability to appoint a maximum of six more judges to the U.S. Supreme Court, effectively giving him a lot of control over the court’s decisions. Critics of the bill saw it as FDR’s attempt to consolidate too much power in office. The bill was deemed unconstitutional and failed. President Roosevelt’s attempt at consolidating more administrative power does not compare to the growing demands, by a prominent number of Americans, for the radical displacement of democratic power in favor of dictatorships.

Lewis’s and Roth’s novels further unveil the cloak of patriotism that fascists utilized to justify their ideology. In the midst of the Great Depression, on the verge of war, and due in part to a widespread fear of communism, a lot of people began to advocate for fascism in the states. “These voices welcoming fascism were not marginal radicals,” writes a Washington Post article, “but mainstream writers, presidents of major associations and editors of popular journals” (Gunitsky). The popularity of fascism was proliferating within the nation. Those that abhorred communism and felt disillusioned by capitalism, saw fascism as a promising direction. By the turn of the decade, “more than 100 such organizations had formed since 1933” (Gunitsky). The most popular among these organizations was the German American Bund. The Bund’s influence is marked by their Madison Square Garden rally in 1939. At this rally, “Twenty-two thousand Bund members” held placards and signs saying, “Wake up America! Smash Jewish Communism,” and other similar messages (Foreman and Meyer). They shared Nazi imagery and antisemitic propaganda with their crowd members under the guise of patriotism. The German American Bund even argued that George Washington was the “first fascist,” calling their followers “American patriots” (Reimann). The Bund used revisionist tactics to frame Washington as a fascist hero and referred to their people as patriots to defend their fascists beliefs. In *It Can’t Happen Here* and *The Plot Against America*, this patriotic cloak is reflected in the tactics of the antagonists, demonstrating the authors’ awareness to such ploys.

The majority of America did not want authoritarianism, totalitarianism, or any form of fascism, however. They still put their faith in FDR as the last bastion of hope for democracy to prove it was the best route for America. As president, FDR stimulated more economic growth and strengthened the dominance of liberalism within the government. He was a hero in the eyes of many and they kept him under a spotlight so that what he would do next with democracy could be observed. “To many people around the world, Roosevelt was the hope of a democratic government” (Lepore 435). While in office, FDR received a considerable number of letters from people that discussed their anxieties and wishes. One of these letters was sent by a British economist named John Maynard Keynes. He wrote:

You have made yourself the Trustee for those in every country who seek to mend the evils of our condition by reasoned experiment within the framework of the existing social system. If you fail rational change will be gravely prejudiced throughout the world, leaving orthodoxy and revolution to fight it out. But if you succeed, new and bolder methods will be tried everywhere, and we may date the first chapter of a new economic era from your accession to office (Brinkley 65)

Lewis and Roth highlight this growing doubt about the practicality of democracy to represent how vulnerable the system had become to its fascist alternative. Keynes suggested that Roosevelt needed to be successful with revitalizing America, or the world would lose faith in the viability of democracy. FDR’s success with democracy became as much of an experiment for some as it was a beacon of hope for others. America would find triumph in its democracy and economic relief through the Second World War. The Axis powers, Japan and Germany, had overextended and incited a spirit of intervention in the United States. The nation that initially remained neutral to the conflict entered the war and became heavy hitters on the global stage. World War II brought America “out of depression” and ended “American isolationism” (Lepore 473). Though while this happened, Roosevelt won two more presidential elections.

Democracy in America survived the depression and the war, but the authors of *It Can’t Happen Here* and *The Plot Against America* understood the strain that was placed on it. Democracy was not without its troubles as it seemed vulnerable and flawed to many. Lewis and Roth recognized that fascism within the nation could develop in a distinctly American way. People lost faith in democracy but feared communism and saw fascism as the lesser of two evils. Regardless of political leanings, left or right, there was room for authoritarianism to sprout in American politics.

**Isolationism vs. Interventionism**

World War II created new issues that could be exploited in the States, which did not completely pertain to money. These issues took the shape of “war versus peace” debates that opportunists could take advantage of. The debates were best embodied by isolationism and interventionism politics. Recovering from the losses of World War I, Americans adopted the policy of isolationism, which allowed fascism to rise globally and locally. Advocates of isolationism asserted that it was more important to focus on America’s issues before any other nation’s affairs. Isolationists avoided the conflicts in Asia and Europe to bolster economic prosperity and national security. They believed that avoiding conflict would mean that the regimes would not invade U.S. soil and that not engaging in the war would prevent American casualties.

As regimes in Asia and Europe began to pose a larger threat, debates regarding upholding isolationism moved to the forefront of political conversations. By 1937 and ’38, Congress passed neutrality acts that preserved isolationists policies in legislation. Though America was slowly transitioning to a more active role in the international conflict. By 1940, the U.S. had shifted to a foreign policy of “non-belligerency by providing aid to the nations at war with the Axis Powers” (DoS). Isolationists could see that the tides were turning towards interventionism.

Interventionism dictated that America would commit to engaging in World War II to the fullest extent, frightening those they were afraid to go to war. As a result, some Americans were willing to believe all of the rhetoric from isolationists. Interventionism meant that America could no longer walk the line of supporting allies while remaining formally neutral. Isolationists wanted to prevent this and argued of the dangers Americans would be put in. FDR called these people “shrimps” – animals with “a nerve cord and no brain.” Isolationists who he thought “deluded themselves into believing that America could remain aloof, secure, and distant” from a global war (Dunn 43). These isolationists, like the famous aviator Charles Lindbergh, warned that interventionism would result in the serious casualties of countless Americans. They believed that the ocean provided a natural barrier that no foreign nation would dare test, so long as America did not poke the bear. Lindbergh asserted, “the United States cannot win this war for England,” adding that Germany was bound to be victorious and America should greet the Reich’s victory with “cooperation, friendship, and trade” (Dunn 291). The aviator’s wishes would not be granted. In December 1941, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, prompting the United States to officially join the war.

Lewis and Roth thematize issues about peace and war because they recognize the charged, nuanced nature of interventionism versus isolationism. It was a significant clash of foreign policies that impacted the lives of everyone in the nation. The authors address how this single, sensitive political stance could sway the minds of Americans depending on which issue they stood for. Those who were afraid of war were more likely to listen to propaganda from other isolationists. Roth demonstrates this by using Lindbergh as an antagonist in his novel. Lindbergh’s isolationist stance and popularity allowed him to make pro-Nazi remarks, frequently. The context of such a divisive policy during the 30’s adds to the themes of desperation and manipulation that both authors examine in the novels.

**Antisemitism in the States**

Sinclair Lewis and Philip Roth depict alternative versions of America that are packed with anti-Jewish behavior that reflect the antisemitic social climate of the real America during that time. The fascist antagonists of both novels spout propaganda and disinformation against Jews to the American public. Many of the nation’s people, including other Jews, consume this rhetoric and perpetuate anti-Jewish actions. Fictional and fictionalized characters create an unwelcoming, dangerous environment for Jews as a product of ignorance and intolerance. Yet, despite the fictional nature of the books, the antisemitism in the States was very real.

While Jewish persecution in Europe became the focal point of the treatment of Jews in the 1930s, America itself harbored potent antisemitic sentiments which made people more complacent about hateful, anti-Jewish propaganda. Spearheaded by figures like by Father Charles Coughlin, William Dudley Pelley and Gerald L. K. Smith, antisemitic rhetoric was disseminated across the country. Coughlin had the second largest radio following in America and used his broadcasts to promote Jewish hate and conspiracy theories. The priest’s audience grew so large, that at one point “one-third of the nation was tuned into his weekly broadcasts” (Social Security History). Similarly, Henry Ford authored papers called, “The Dearborn Independent” in the Roaring Twenties. The paper occasionally libeled Jews and made the accusation that “a global Jewish community conspires for world domination” (American Jewish Archive). The German American bund spouted antisemitic hate to their considerably large base. In 1940, a poll “found that nearly a fifth of Americans saw Jews as a national "menace" -- more than any other group” (Gunitsky). Jews faced severe persecution all across the globe.

Even years after the start of World War II and the Holocaust, antisemitic ideas about the threat of Jews to the nation remained prevalent. Tensions and hostilities towards marginalized groups steadily increased after the Great Depression. According to various polls in the ‘40s, “Jews were seen as a greater menace to the welfare of the United States than any other national, religious, or racial group” (Greear 32). Mississippi Representative (Democrat) John Elliot Rankin, in a 1943 speech in Congress, once said:

When those communistic Jews—of whom the decent Jews are ashamed—go around here and hug and kiss these Negroes, dance with them, intermarry with them, and try to force their way into white restaurants, white hotels and white picture shows, they are not deceiving any red-blooded American, and, above all, they are not deceiving the men in our armed forces—as to who is at the bottom of all this race trouble.

The better element of the Jews, and especially the old line American Jews throughout the South and West, are not only ashamed of, but they are alarmed at, the activities of these communistic Jews who are stirring this trouble up.

They have caused the deaths of many good Negroes who never would have got into trouble if they had been left alone, as well as the deaths of many good white people, including many innocent, unprotected white girls, who have been raped and murdered by vicious Negroes, who have been encouraged by those alien-minded Communists to commit such crimes (Slomovitz).

Jews in the States felt the weight of anti-Jewish sentiments everywhere. The radio, press, news; from neighbors, and schoolmates; from white nationalists groups and pro-Nazi politicians; from many Americans across the nation, Jews were persecuted and discriminated against.

Roth and Lewis sought to encapsulate this looming fear and hatred that expanded in the United States and show how Americans were more susceptible to intolerant propaganda, especially when it was spread by popular figures. Roth uses the perspective of a young Jewish boy with elements of his own life to capture the genuine terror and uncertainty that international and home-bred antisemitism instilled into the Jewish community. “I knew something about Nazi anti-Semitism and about the American anti-Semitism,” Roth writes in a New York Times article, “that was being stoked, one way or another, by eminent figures like Henry Ford and Charles Lindbergh.” Roth conveys that, like fascism, it was not only radicals that disseminated hateful rhetoric. During that time period, they “were among the most famous international celebrities of the century” (Roth). In their novels, Roth and Lewis demonstrate how Americans became more willing to believe in this rhetoric and how these beliefs divided America, leaving room for ill-intentioned leaders to attempt an acquisition of power.

**Section II: The Deceptive Tactics of Fascists**

**Buzz Windrip**

Berzelius “Buzz” Windrip is a fictional character and the main antagonist of *It Can’t Happen Here*. Windrip ascends to power with a populist approach. He promises Americans economic prosperity and accountability for the elites that fail to honor the “common man.” It is the consensus that “Windrip is clearly modelled after Huey Long,” the real, former Louisiana governor and U.S. Senator (Nazaryan). Long was bound to contend with FDR for the 1936 American presidential election. He too used a populist approach with his “Every Man a King” speech and campaign. Long was assassinated 1935, shortly before he’d reach the chance to actually compete in the election. Many of Long’s proposed changes and legislations seemed economically promising to some. But, under a microscope, these proposals and intended changes were boarding, if not already, on dictatorial tactics. Long’s plans had an underlying overextension of the power that would be afforded to him as president. Huey Long’s aggressive, demagogue traits are reflected in Buzz. Lewis takes creative liberties to craft a plausible, albeit extreme, incarnation of Long in power.

In Lewis’s novel, Buzz Windrip runs for and wins the presidential election of 1936. In the early stages of his campaign, Windrip promises riches and revitalization for the American people. He tells them what they want to hear and appeals to their fears, greed, desperation, and desires. Windrip, for the most part, is playing a character. His public appearance is a carefully constructed persona made by himself and a few other key figures, like his vice president. Windrip, and his vice president, go so far as to conjure up an autobiography about Buzz called “Zero Hour: Over the Top” that further grounds and connects him to the America’s working classes. Windrip manipulates the public to garner votes and power until he obtains the status of president.

Once he achieves his goal of becoming the president, Windrip’s veil is quickly removed. He attacks Congress, the Supreme Court, and any of his detractors. He establishes an authoritarian militia named the Minute Men, makes concentration camps, orders the distribution of widespread propaganda, and permits violent protest suppression and executions. Buzz Windrip enforces fascist policies and fundamentals for his remaining time in the novel until his vice president betrays him to take over his regime.

**Charles Lindbergh**

Charles Lindbergh was a real person and an American aviator who made history by completing the first non-stop solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927. When he arrived in Paris, one-hundred thousand people rushed the airfield to see him. When he returned to New York, four million people celebrated his arrival. He instantly rose to celebrity status. A 1927 Atlanta Constitution article wrote, “no conqueror in the history of the world ever received a welcome such as was accorded Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh” (Dunn). In the eyes of the American public, he was hailed as a hero.

Lindbergh would continue to enjoy the comforts of a socially elevated status for years until 1932. During this year, the aviator’s infant son would be kidnapped and reported missing for months before his body was discovered on the side of a road. A trial ensued and for the next three years, the Lindbergh family would be placed under the spotlight of intense sensationalist news stories. The event was so massively covered that it would be referred to as “The Crime of the Century” (Thomas). In 1935, the Lindbergh’s moved to Europe to escape some of the attention. Lindbergh lived abroad for around four years. In this time, he visited Germany on multiple occasions to gauge their militaristic aviation capabilities. These visits impressed Lindbergh as Germany seemed to maintain potent organization and force. He eventually concluded that the German Air Force would be almost impossible for any nation’s power to surmount. Thus, Lindbergh felt that it would be a terrible choice for America to oppose Nazi Germany. He would go on accept a medal from the Nazi leader, Hermann Göring in his last year or so in Europe.

In 1939, Lindbergh came back to the United States. Within a year, he was recruited to speak for the America First movement at rallies and advocated for isolationist politics. He contended with FDR’s assertions that America was in danger of a foreign invasion. Lindbergh claimed that the United States would not experience the threat of an international assault unless it provoked foreign countries. “Our danger in America,” suggested Lindbergh, “is an internal danger” (New York Times). Lindbergh proclaimed to the American public over radio broadcasts and in speeches that FDR’s hostility towards Germany would result in “neither friendship nor peace” (Dunn). Yet these recurrent connections to Germany did not hurt Lindbergh’s established fame. He grew even more popular among right-wing groups and isolationists supporters like the America First Committee.

Lindbergh’s active push to keep America out of the war and his Nazi-sympathetic sentiments peaked in his notorious 1941 “Who Are the War Agitators” speech. In Des Moines, Iowa, Lindbergh would speak to a crowd of thousands and address his thoughts on the elements that were driving America down the path of war. He blamed “the British, the Jewish, and the Roosevelt administration” (PBS). He made points that treated Jews and the Roosevelt administration as potential problems that upheld foreign interests. This speech would garner significant criticisms towards Lindbergh as many Americans called out its antisemitic message and violent implications.

This is where Roth’s novel diverges from history because he pondered the question: what if Republicans ran Lindbergh for presidency? In *The Plot Against America*, Charles A. Lindbergh wins the 1940 United States presidential election against FDR. He promises peace and national security through neutrality. To fulfill this objective, he meets with Nazis and Axis members to sign treaties and guarantee America’s non-involvement in World War II. He maintains his pro-Nazi and antisemitic views, though he is not forthright about those antisemitic views. The aviator turned president develops the Office of American Absorption to create American assimilation programs that will divide the US’s Jewish population. Over the course of America’s gradual transition from a democracy to a fascist run nation, tensions increasingly rise among its citizens. Lindbergh’s America sees growing violence and fatal antisemitic riots. The nation is swallowed by fear, hate, and uncertainty while Lindbergh remains aloof to the issues under his administration. The plot’s chaos, under President Lindbergh, culminates into his mysterious disappearance. In 1942, Lindbergh seems to vanish off the face of the Earth and various conspiracies arise to explain it away. However, Lindbergh’s egregious effect over America surely prevails.

**Manipulative Populism**

Focusing on compelling dictators, Lewis and Roth share a concern with the unchecked abuse of manipulative populist techniques.

Populism refers to the political approach of appealing to common folk, often through identifying “the elite” of society as enemies. It is an ideological method that pits “the people” against “the elite.” It is generally effective in grounding a political figure so that they are more relatable to people in the working classes. Populism has a long history in American politics. In 1930’s America, it was most prominently demonstrated by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Senator Huey Long. In detailing the rise of Roosevelt, Jill Lepore says FDR “stumped for the Democratic nomination” on a “new brand of liberalism” which relied on “Bryan’s populism” and “Wilson’s Progressivism” (Lepore 429). President Hoover, who occupied the office before Roosevelt, was known to be quite uncharismatic. Thus, Americans had become familiar with a leader who was somewhat awkward. Yet, Roosevelt was “untroubled by any such awkwardness,” gaining him the nickname “Feather Duster Roosevelt” (428). Charisma is a valuable tool for populists as it makes the public more willing to listen to the populist. Charisma not the only requirement of becoming a populist, it just makes populists’ words appear more agreeable. Huey Long also relied on populism – to the point where he was regarded as a demagogue. Demagogues are regarded as “political agitators who appeal to the passions and prejudices of the mob in order to obtain power or further [their] own interests” (Oxford English Dictionary). They neglect or care little for logical reasoning and are extreme versions of populists. Long became a detractor of FDR. Among many of his criticisms against FDR, Long once stated in his “Every Man a King” speech, “Mr. Roosevelt said there had to be a decentralization of wealth,” but [FDR] never “did anything about it” (Long 590). Long’s criticisms of FDR carried the underlying sentiment that Roosevelt was not living up to the promises he made to the people. Long’s populist approach escalated Americans’ fears of economic ruin by undermining FDR’s financial plans. Huey Long sought to persuade people to vote for him by appealing to their concerns for money and misrepresenting FDR. This underlying sentiment resonates with the issues of what I refer to as manipulative populism.

Manipulative populism is a populist approach saturated with false promises and disingenuous assertions. Politicians and public figures use manipulative populism to misguide people and gain their support, without genuinely having the people’s best interests in mind. The problems of such an approach are thematized in *It Can’t Happen Here* and *The Plot Against America*. The main antagonists of the books mislead the public by creating a relatable persona. There are multiple instances in which Buzz Windrip and Charles Lindbergh say things that do not match their actions, or what the readers of the novels know to be true. Their intentions are contradictory to their vows.

Buzz Windrip, the fascist antagonist in the novel, embodies manipulative, disingenuous populist traits and techniques. Windrip, before his presidential run, did everything in his power to get in the good graces of “the people.” These populist techniques are most apparent in the chapter epigraphs in Lewis’s fictional rendering of Windrip’s autobiography, “Zero Hour: Over the Top.” These epigraphs include the various ways in which Windrip describes himself to the public. In one of the epigraphs, he writes that he would rather follow an anarchist if that anarchist provided for the “humble cabin of the Common Man” than follow a “college graduate, ex-cabinet member statesmen.” Windrip concludes by asking the common man to help him “slash the big logs of Poverty and Intolerance to pieces” (44). Here, Windrip is portraying himself as a leader who values humility, the working class, and equity. He strengthens his appeal by taking aim at the privileged, like college graduates, before offering a sense of hope to working class people in his request to them for joining together to end poverty and intolerance. These are telltale signs of a populist approach. At another point, Windrip complains about being dragged from his “family hearthside” to appear at public meetings that he “so much detest.” In that same excerpt, he compares himself to “the Child Jesus talking to the Doctors in the Temple” (49). By discussing his prioritization of family values, he continues to ground himself as an everyday man. Windrip assert that he doesn’t “pretend to be a very educated man, except maybe educated in the heart,” and adds that “Love and that Patriotism have been my sole guiding principles in Politics” (60, 69). He deliberately portrays himself as compassionate and unassuming. In addition to this he writes, “usually I’m pretty mild, in fact many of my friends are kind enough to call it “Folksy”” (130). The point is that he presents himself as tolerant, humble, a family man, a common man, and relatively liberal. Windrip fits the image of a person that the American people want to see. However, what makes it manipulative is that despite his appeals, the majority of his claims are not true. Windrip depicts himself as uneducated, but in truth he “had worked his way through a Southern Baptist College” (26). Windrip refers to himself as “mild” and humble, yet he compares himself to Jesus. He claims to be trustworthy and for the poor, but he once “grafted $200,000 of tax money” (27).

As Lewis highlights, what makes this tragic is that none of these contradictions in character really matters or changes public perception. Buzz Windrip, with his promise of wealth and prosperity, was “a Professional Common Man” and a “public liar, easily detected” (71, 72). What his background and story lacked in truth was more than made up for by his ability to buy people’s votes. In the Great Depression, populism was especially effective because it brought the promise of wealth to Americans suffering from the recession. Populists, like the actual Huey Long or the fictional Buzz Windrip, recognized this and tried to utilize populism to garner more support.

To reinforce Lewis’s worry about manipulative populism being used as a vehicle to wield authority in American democracy, Lewis devises a particularly manipulative roadmap for Windrip’s presidential campaign. In his roadmap, entitled “The Fifteen Points of Victory for the Forgotten Men,” Windrip offers many plans that undermine America’s democratic political virtues. Of the fifteen points, at least six of them raise serious alarms: the restrictions of freedom of religion (61), the drastic increase in military power and presence, the refusal to condemn antisemitic nations (62), the mandate that black people “shall be prohibited from voting,” that women will now be forcibly ushered from the workforce and back into housewife positions, that communist and socialist advocates will be convicted of high treason (63), and that Congress “shall serve only in an advisory capacity” while the Supreme Court is basically abolished for “unconstitutional” reasons (64). All of these are regressive ideologies and practices. Yet, to hide his glaring authoritarian pursuits, Windrip sandwiches many of these plans between promises of money and property for American citizens. His Fifteen Points of Victory roadmap assures “the Right to Private Property for all time” (61), $5,000 a year to every family (63), and bonuses to every veteran who fought in any American war (64). In this way, Windrip abuses the democratic processes with disingenuous populist techniques. He denounces “all Fascism and Naziism” so that he can still appeal to the American base, regardless of where potential voters were on the political spectrum. Although Windrip’s very own roadmap shows this tolerant and generous sentiment to be untrue, it did not matter once he advocates for “everyone’s get rich by just voting to be rich” strategy (77).

Populism traditionally ostracizes the rich and powerful, but it is primarily focused on appealing to the needs of the people. Manipulative populism also does this, but only for appearances. Manipulative populists do not generally feel the need to push away potentially wealthy investors in any genuine capacity. Since money is a common, potent concern for most people, it is the easiest tool for populists to weaponize. The needs and anxieties of the working classes extend far beyond only considering money, however. Whether it be food, housing, clean water, jobs, or national security, people have a vast range of needs. In this way, a populist, manipulative or not, can be very flexible in picking which need to focus on. As Jan-Werner Muller states, “the populist decides who the real people are; and whoever does not want to be unified on the populist’s terms is completely and utterly excluded” (4). Thus, manipulative populism gains more utility in its flexibility. The approach flourishes by choosing which of the people’s needs and anxieties to weaponize in times of desperation.

The extensive practice of manipulative populism reemerges in *The Plot Against America* with Charles Lindbergh. Where Buzz Windrip leaned into American demands for money driven by the consternation around the Great Depression, Lindbergh bases his appeals on national security and Americans’ apprehensions for war. Lindbergh is an isolationist. During his presidential run, his administration argues in favor of America remaining uninvolved in the growing global conflict. Lindbergh asserts that his goal as president were to keep “America out of all foreign wars and of keeping all foreign wars out of America” (84). He frequently presents his isolationist policies as a means of maintaining peace and security in America. These values are generally always one of the top priorities of many Americans. Though, they are magnified in the midst of wars. Lindbergh takes advantage of the growing anxieties of American individuals to boost his status. While giving a speech in Des Moines, Iowa, Lindbergh said, “no person of honesty and vision can look on their pro-war policy […] without seeing the dangers involved” for every American (13). His speeches about isolationism prove to be so popular that he is referred to as “the idol of isolationists” (12). Lindbergh’s isolationist rhetoric provides fearful Americans a desperately needed sense of comfort during a violent time of uncertainty. People did not want their loved ones to be hurt in the war. Others did not want to be told that they were going to war.

This comfort is so effective as a populist tool that many Americans, including some Jews, are willing to remain complicit or agree with Lindbergh, even after more of his anti-Semitic thoughts came to light. Monty, Phil’s uncle, gets into an argument with Herman about Lindbergh’s impact on the economy and national security. Monty questions whether Herman would be okay if his own sons have to fight in WWII, saying, “we’re out of the war, and we’re staying out of the war.” Further adding that, “Lindbergh’s done me no harm that I can see” (124). Monty is not alone with his opinion. There were the Just Folks organization which sought to assimilate Jews into Lindbergh’s America by stripping them of their identity. Yet, the Just Folks program and Lindbergh’s policies were still successful. By preying on American fear of war, the “enormous popularity of Lindbergh’s isolationist policies had begun to win even the support of many Jews” (146). Lindbergh primarily demonstrates a populist approach by framing himself as a champion of the people that refuses to send them to the chaos of global conflict. This is supported by his ties with the America First committee. America First was a group of far-right, anti-Semitic isolationists who insisted that they were putting the needs of Americans before any foreign affairs. To the committee “he remained the most popular proselytizer of its argument for neutrality” (14). Lindbergh’s administration presents him as a man that would maintain some form of status quo and security. To preserve this image, he repeats phrases like, “an independent destiny for America” (84). He assures Americans that their world will not crumble, even if the rest of the outside world does. But what makes Charles Lindbergh a manipulative populist is the fact that none of these promises of peace and security are true.

Lindbergh’s actions and legislation threaten the security of many Americans, but preeminent among them were the Jews. His anti-Semitic and fascist ideas undermine his promises of safety and peace for all Americans. Phil begins his narration of the novel with an introduction to his life under Lindbergh. The first statement he makes is, “fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear.” Roth immediately lets the reader know that Lindbergh is not who he will present himself as. Phil further wonders “if [he] would have been a less frightened boy if Lindbergh hadn’t been president” (1). To a young Jewish American, The Lone Eagle was a threat. Lindbergh’s disingenuous populist approach is reinforced by his interactions with Adolf Hitler and other fascist supporters. Shortly after his inauguration, “the new American president” went to Iceland for a meeting with Hitler to ensure “peaceful relations between Germany and the United States” (53). Lindbergh’s actions contradict his guarantees of security for all Americans. His meeting with such a malignant figure demonstrates his genuine lack of regard for the wishes of all Americans. The president’s detractors criticize the president for “dealing with a murderous fascist tyrant as his equal” (54). They suggest that Lindbergh condoned the deplorable behavior of Nazism. Yet, instead of disputing these claims, Lindbergh justifies his actions with more isolationist rhetoric. The president returns to Washington and addresses the criticism with a guarantee that America will avoid war in Europe and that “we will join no warring party anywhere on this globe” (54). After this address to the nation, Lindbergh proceeds to meet with Prince Fumimaro Konoye and Foreign Minister Matsuoka. These meetings would solidify the United States as a “party in all but name to the Axis triple alliance” (55). Under the guise of helping “the people” avoid the dangers of WWII, the president associates with anti-Semites and authoritarians, people with ideologies that Lindbergh conclusively has lots in common with.

Aside from Lindbergh’s involvement with bad actors, his manipulative abuse of populism is further conveyed through his neglect of the civil unrest that grew during his presidency. He dismisses the concerns of American Jews who begin to worry about their future safety under Lindbergh’s administration. Instead, he creates the Office of American Absorption which establishes the Homestead 42 act. This act would remove Jews from their homes and place them in various places like Kentucky under the guise of a “relocation opportunity.” Lindbergh’s proposed legislation escalates the fears and anxieties in Jews. Phil’s father, Herman, says “this is the way Hitler did it” deeming it an experiment for Lindbergh’s administration to see how much they can get away with (225). This possible, alarming reality was weighing on the minds of Jews across the nation. Walter Winchell, the famous radio broadcaster, refers to the Homestead 42 project as, “the targeting of America’s Jews by the Lindbergh fascists” (228).

Despite his populist appeals about maintaining the security of Americans, Lindbergh never makes real attempts to ease their fears; he does not truly care for Jews as Americans. He neglects Jews until they feel the need to act themselves for the sake of self-preservation and keeping the America they know from crumbling. Winchell campaigns for president. He is harassed, assaulted, and threatened by anti-Semites constantly. He is called a derogatory slur and told to “go home” (264). Yet Lindbergh never addresses this rising tension and bigotry. Phil even notes at this time Lindbergh’s appointed secretary of interior was Henry Ford. Ford owned an anti-Semitic newspaper which mentioned that “the cleansing of America” Jews across the globe were “conscious enemies of all that Anglo-Saxons mean by civilization” (265). Lindbergh makes no attempts to cease the anti-Semitic rioting that breaks out across the Midwest. The riots sweep Detroit and schools, buildings of worship, and people are vandalized and attacked. To escape from the riots, “several hundred of the city’s thirty thousand Jews had fled” (266). The violence and civil conflict continue to escalate in the days following Winchell’s initial campaigns. Lindbergh, and the mayors of towns in which the violence occurred, remain radio silent. The growing violence culminates into the assassination of Walter Winchell (272). Winchell’s death is still not enough to draw the attention of Lindbergh, nor is it enough to cease the violence brought on by anti-Semitic Lindbergh supporters. The fears of American Jews are at an all-time high and despite Lindbergh’s assurances of peace, Jews are subjected to conflict in their own hometowns. Lindbergh offers no more reassurances following the chaos. When he finally makes an appearance and gives another speech, “the president makes no mention of Walter Winchell,” and omits mentioning “the assassination two days earlier or the funeral the day before” (306). The Lone Eagle promises peace and portrays himself as a man that cares more about the security of his fellow Americans than international politics, but this proves to be untrue. He excludes millions of people from this peaceful dream while in office and neglects their feelings of insecurity.

Sinclair Lewis and Philip Roth convey the dangers of blindly entrusting charismatic leaders with power. The authors understand the feelings of desperation or hope that initially drives people to follow manipulative populists. But they also understand that demagogues prey upon this desperation. An underlying link between Windrip and Lindbergh is that the cracks in the characters that they were portraying to the public were showing before they ascended to power. Windrip’s deceitful hypocrisy is put on display in his autobiography and presidential roadmap. Lindbergh reveals his flaws through his anti-Semitic comments and meetings with fascists. Yet both antagonists rise to power anyway. In this way, Lewis and Roth suggests that manipulative populists understand the power of appealing to peoples’ needs in times of suffering and anxiety. They use promises and grander dreams as a lure to reel people onto their side, while simultaneously using these promises to distract Americans from the manipulative populist’s true nature. They know that if they succeed in their goals, they don’t need to fulfill those promises. Once the demagogues acquire enough influence and power, the only thing left to do is exploit that power.

**Radicalization Through Binarization**

However, populism is not the only approach that Lewis and Roth feature to demonstrate the manipulative tactics of those who seek to exploit democracy’s vulnerabilities. Like manipulative populism, binarization is a political practice that divides political discourse and ideologies into two opposing sides. It strips the nuance and complexity from many concepts and frames a situation or topic as “this” versus “that.” In only leaving two conflicting options, politicians can more easily pigeonhole potential voters into aligning with them and their policies. In this regard, binarization is notably similar to populism. Populists can rely on binarization to strengthen their political goals. Binarization is a common practice in the world of politics, but when it is taken too far, it can swiftly result in radicalization. In scholarly discourse, this radicalization is also referred to as political polarization.

Political polarization can take many different forms and vary in intensity. Political journalists, Glenn Geher and Jordan Wylie, separate the concept into four distinct categories: “affective,” “ideological,” “elite,” and “social.” Affective political polarization addresses the dislikes and disapprovals between political opponents. Ideological polarization refers to divides in world views and morals. Elite refers to the polarity between political elites. Social refers to the division between average Americans. These categories help us analyze how political polarization can affect the many facets of a political landscape. Sinclair Lewis and Philip Roth use Windrip and Lindbergh to demonstrate how fascists exploit polarization on every level.

Intensity in political polarization references the range of the divide between people affected by the binarization of ideas and topics. For example, the intensity of polarity can be fairly mild to moderate. This range would encompass feelings as inconsequential as a dislike or disagreement with a subject, but still a willingness to compromise on it. However, on the other end of the range is an extremely intense polarity between people. This range would encompass radicalization and peoples’ extreme unwillingness to compromise on subjects. It is this intense polarity range that Lewis and Roth draw attention to in their respective novels.

In Roth’s novel, political polarization is perpetuated by Lindbergh’s binarization tactics with isolationism and national security. Early in Lindbergh’s presidential career, he deepens a divide in Americans by asserting that those who did not align with him were pro-war. In his campaign speeches, he states that Americans were not really choosing between Lindbergh and FDR, as they thought they were. Rather they were choosing “between Lindbergh and war” (30). Like Buzz Windrip who reduces peoples’ options by saying that they could vote to be rich, Lindbergh oversimplifies the complexities of electoral decisions. “The choice is simple,” Lindbergh says. “Vote for Lindbergh or vote for war” (31). It radicalizes potential voters by reducing the depth of interventionism and isolationist foreign policies and encouraging single-issue politics. The republican nominee removes all layers of complexity associated with interventionist policies and frames the concept as pro-war to add a connotation of violence and guaranteed conflict to the subject. Lindbergh’s administration and his republican supporters even demonstrate affective polarization when they refer to FDR as “the warmonger in the White House” (13). In ascribing pro-war intentions to FDR’s administration, Lindbergh effectively directs all attention on the presidential race to one matter. Within a democracy, voters consider numerous factors in determining if an individual is fit to hold office. The presidency is especially important. Lindbergh’s establishment of a political landscape that focuses on only a single issue for the most powerful position in America’s government suggests how he weaponizes binarization to increase political polarization in his favor. He uses this binarization tactic to absolve himself of any criticisms directed towards him by redirecting every topic into a matter of peace versus war. Lindbergh uses this redirection to excuse his anti-Semitism, just as he reasons that his meetings with Hitler and other fascists were in the pursuit of neutrality and national security. In response to claims about his antisemitic comments and actions, Lindbergh states that a “few far-sighted Jewish people” know the importance of peace and “stand opposed to intervention,” but “the majority still don’t” (13). He frames the argument as a matter of peace over war rather than acknowledging the argument as a matter of discrimination and persecution. Lindbergh strategically limits the public’s focus to two conflicting sides, giving one side a negative significance and then contrasting himself with it. In the midst of an ideological separation, his supporters become blind to his faults.

Therefore, Roth suggests that the more polarized people become, the more indifferent they are to a politician’s flaws, regardless of how alarming they may be. Roth demonstrates this process in his representation of Lindbergh’s supporters. Once the foundations were set to pick between Lindbergh and peace or war, many Americans swiftly back the presidential candidate. After he signs the peace treaties with Axis members, Americans everywhere say, “No war, no young men fighting and dying ever again!” The focus for these Americans is on the pursuit of peace promised by Lindbergh. The supporters go so far as to assert that “Lindbergh can deal with Hitler […] Hitler respects him because he’s Lindbergh” (55). The potential for peace is so vital to them that they ignore the ethics of meeting with fascists. Lindbergh enlarges a social polarization in America as he convinces some citizens that his antisemitic, pro-Nazi actions are justified.

Sinclair Lewis reinforces the issues of polarization achieved through binarization as Windrip divides America into pro-Windrip supporters and enemies of the nation. Buzz’s technique for gaining the support of Americans is belligerent and antagonistic. When Buzz Windrip is not promising money to citizens across the nation, he is actively vilifying his opponents and detractors. This aggressive style is hinted at in his populism when he targets the privileged, educated members of the government in an “elite” category of polarization. But the aggression is further observable in his relationship with the press and journalists. While campaigning, Buzz transforms his hotels into offices so that he can lobby various individuals and organizations. He invites “stockbrokers, labor leaders, distillers,” firm representatives, oil and energy industry representatives, and “advocates of war and of war against war,” journalists, and etc. Windrip assures these groups that their support of him will result in the mutual benefit of profitable, successful business growth. Some did not buy into Windrip’s words, “most of them newspapermen” (74). Journalism serves as Windrip’s most difficult adversary to control. It is no surprise that the journalists are the most resistant to his charm. Newspapers and the press attempt to hold Windrip accountable, or at least see through his veil, thus drawing his resentment. In a passage from Zero Hour, Buzz writes, “almost all editors hide away in spider-dens, men without thought of Family or Public Interest” (34). He aims to binarize journalists as men disconnected from American values. In doing so, he tries to undermine printed criticisms about his actions to avoid responsibility or being exposed. Americans that believe in Windrip, refuse to consume papers that that are opposed to him.

But the extent to which Windrip’s aggressive technique is used to divide America is seen in his mistreatment of his critics and opponents. He increases ideological and social polarization by framing his detractors as traitors and anti-American communists, or likewise, that deserve serious punishment, including death. In Windrip’s Fifteen Points roadmap he includes a rule specifically targeting “any person advocating Communism, Socialism, or Anarchism, advocating refusal to enlist in case of war, or advocating alliance with Russia in any war whatsoever.” He adds the stipulation that these people “shall be subject to trial for high treason,” serve a minimum period of “twenty years at hard labor in prison,” and may be executed or killed for the maximum punishment (63). Buzz’s iron-fisted approach to suppressing communism and socialism demonstrates his lack of liberal thought. But his scorn towards these political ideologies is not unexpected as there was already a considerable amount of tension around communism and socialism in America during this period. Doremus Jessup, the novel’s protagonist, reveals that the truly terrifying aspect of Windrip’s point is that “anybody who opposes Buzz in any way at all can be called a Communist and scragged for it” (65). The point allows the president to label all of his opponents as lawbreakers and criminals under the guise of communism, socialism, and the other political ideologies. This binarization grants Windrip more free reign as his detractors will be less likely to publicly denounce him. His freedom to label detractors this way is also a productive polarization method because it stimulates a sense of loyal patriotism in his followers. They believe that Windrip is on the right side of preserving American values, so by supporting him they are too. Windrip supporters experience an intense social and ideological polarity between them and non-supporters. They are less likely to listen to or respect his detractors who they deem are traitors.

The polarity of Windrip’s America escalates to violent interactions between Windrip supporters and those that he labels as enemies of the nation. In one of his rallies, Doremus encounters the Minute Men (M.M.), a militia consisting of dispossessed, poor, and vexed Americans that seek fulfillment through Windrip’s presidency. At the rally, the M.M. brutalizes an elderly FDR supporter, relentlessly assault a naval officer, and charge a group of communists. Doremus observes “thirty M.M.’s cheerfully” storm the communists while “a battalion leader [reaches] up,” slaps a Jewish girl speaker, drags her off a platform, and the M.M. proceed to use clubs on other communists around her (95, 96). The aggression that Windrip encouraged proves to be effective as it is adopted by a large portion of his followers. One woman says, “that all opponents of the Chief [Windrip] were Communists and ought to be shot offhand” (308). Windrip employs intense polarization to incite violence and terror throughout the nation. If his detractors are not dissuaded by severe legal repercussions, then perhaps they will fear the physical attacks by his supporters. He understands that he retains more control under a system of chaos. Doremus remarks that rebelling newspapers’ acts of defiance begin to seem tragically doomed:

It seemed worse than futile, it seemed insane, to risk martyrdom in a world where Fascists persecuted Communists, Communists persecuted Social-Democrats, Social-Democrats persecuted everybody who would stand for it; where “Aryans” who looked like Jews persecuted Jews who looked like Aryans and Jews persecuted their debtors (288).

Hate becomes the defining trait of America under Windrip’s administration. Affective, social, elite, and ideological polarizations carry the threat of injury or death, yet still prevent Americans from finding common ground amongst themselves. As the fascist divides the nation in such a barbaric, ruthless manner, Americans have a more difficult time banding together and surmounting his regime.

Although Buzz Windrip’s technique is more aggressive than Lindbergh’s, both fascists utilize polarization of extreme intensity to fragment the nation and its people. They weaponize affective, ideological, social, and elite polarizations to maximize divisions. Affective polarization is established by the fascists through the radical divisions between them and their political opponents or the elite via binarizations, generally seen in their populists’ methods. Windrip and Lindbergh make their opponents appear unrelatable to the common people, disinterested in the wishes of their citizens, and as potential threats to America. They effectively binarize them with overtly egregious behavior.

The antagonists further radicalize the American public by relying on in-group, out-group psychology to facilitate ideological and sociological polarizations. In-groups and out-groups are social groups that a person identifies or does *not* identify as being included in, “based on factors like nationality, race, religion, socioeconomic status, or political affiliation” (Shatz). They binarize people into the in-group by suggesting that those that support the antagonists are on the right side of a divide, while those that do not are erroneous outsiders. Lewis and Roth suggest that these fascists try to separate political and social understandings as much as possible so that they can force Americans to choose sides. With the addition of slandering or maligning their adversaries, they can persuade people to side with the fascists. To this end, the novelists’ inclusion of manipulative populism and radicalization through binarization suggests the dangers of weaponized communication. The authors demonstrate how the power speeches and promises have over people can be turned into tools of manipulation.

**Propaganda Networks**

Lewis’s and Roth’s novels further suggest another deceptive ploy used by demagogues and their supporters in the form of widespread disinformation distributed through propaganda networks. Propaganda is the spread of information for the sake of pushing an agenda. Factual statements, half-truths, rumors, and misinformation can all serve as rhetorical ploys in the creation of propaganda. Misinformation propaganda campaigns are effective at changing and controlling the public’s opinions on certain matters because fake news is not inherently viewed as fraudulent until it is factually contested. Propaganda is one of the most utilized and well known approaches in politics. Teachers, in a study about the importance of propaganda awareness in a democracy, stated that freedom of speech granted by the “Bill of Rights allows any person or group a right to use propaganda” (Jewett). As a consequence of its complex relationship with freedom of speech, propaganda of all forms can be difficult to combat. Clyde Miller, a founder for the Institute of Propaganda Analysis in the 1930s, asserted that the “suppression of propaganda is contrary to democratic principles” (Schiffrin).

Moreover, propaganda is often used to facilitate manipulative populism and radicalization through binarization. Propaganda makes it easier to steer public opinion about demagogues’ actions and characterizations. It also makes it easier to shape the public’s opinions about other candidates or competition. It was considerably efficient during WWI as a means of promoting pro-war agendas, but propaganda grew with the development of radio broadcasting in the United States. “Radio lends itself to propaganda far more easily than the press,” President Hoover stated in a memoir (Lepore 423). As a result, propaganda began to have a larger presence in the years leading up to WWII. It “increased dramatically” in the two decades following WWI as powerful figures and groups “recognized the growing power and influence of the mass media in society” (Lincove 511). Many were aware of the use and implementation of propaganda, but it still remained highly effective. Walter Lippmann discussed his concerns on the matter in his book called *Public Opinion*. Lippman contended that “the new tools of mass persuasion […] meant that a tiny minority could very easily persuade the majority to believe whatever it wished them to believe” (Lepore 401). Propagandists, through the rise of mass media, were granted new ways to disseminate rhetoric to the public on a larger scale. The rise in rhetoric unfortunately encompassed an increased spread of misinformation.

Propaganda networks disseminate misinformation in a social environment. The network can encompass a range of facilitators like radio broadcasting, press, or influential people. These systems can become large and complex, which makes it more difficult to combat misinformation dispersed through the network’s channels. In analyzing how the configurations of propagandists’ networks affect media and politics, it is important “to understand the entire ecosystem: the outlets and influencers who form networks, the structure of networks, and the flow of information in networks” (Benkler et al.). In establishing these systems, propagandists can more easily spread propaganda and create loyal bases.

*The Plot Against America* conveys the dangers of propaganda and mass disinformation distribution through Charles Lindbergh’s antisemitic radio broadcasted speeches and ideas of American assimilation. His speeches provide another layer of propaganda for his plot to corrode democracy. His speeches in the novel alienate Jews in an attempt to consolidate his intolerant base. Jews become the targets of Lindbergh’s anti-war propaganda campaigns. He accuses Jews of being among a few of the powerful groups that were war agitators. In Lindbergh’s famous radio speech in Des Moines, he says one of the “most important groups who have been pressing this country toward war,” which constituted less than three percent of the US’s population, “referred to alternatively as “the Jewish people” and “the Jewish race”” (13). Lindbergh maligns and vilifies Jews just as he binarizes FDR against isolationism. The next day his words meet criticism from many Americans across the political spectrum. Lindbergh refrains from mentioning Jews in his speeches following the backlash. To young Phil, Lindbergh not mentioning Jewish people seems to be “a promising omen,” but to his neighbors it was “a trick” or “a campaign of deceit to catch [Jews] off guard” (17). What Phil initially fails to realize, but what the neighbors understand, is that propaganda is just as much about what is left unspoken as it is about the lies and half-truths told. By not addressing certain details or lying by omission, propagandists can frame a story in a particular way. Lindbergh had already stoked the flames of bigotry and anti-Semitism in America. In neglecting to address the situation, he allows those flames to get bigger while attempting to avoid further confrontation. In Iowa, his speech “elicited roars of approval” from the audience (13). He gave the intolerant base of America a candidate to rally behind. Roth best displays this effect with the America First Committee who praised Lindbergh as a hero. Roth writes:

For many America Firsters there was no debating (even with the facts) Lindbergh’s contention that the Jews’ “greatest danger to this country lies in their large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio, and our government.” When Lindbergh wrote proudly of “our inheritance of European blood,” when he warned against “dilution by foreign races” and “the infiltration of inferior blood” (all phrases that turn up in diary entries from those years), he was recording personal convictions shared by a sizable portion of America First’s rank-and-file membership (14).

Lindbergh’s disinformation and anti-Semitic rhetoric successfully consolidates a notable following. His characterization of Jews as a “danger” to the country because of their “large ownership and influence” in mass media becomes almost ironic. As Phil points out, America Firsters are so captivated by Lindbergh’s propaganda, they would not listen to reason or deliberate “even with the facts.” America Firsters believe that Jews hold a dangerous amount of influence over American society but fail to realize Lindbergh’s control over the press, radio, and government. He plays into the prejudices of a large group to gain supporters. The audience in Iowa and America First members are not the only ones to fall victim to his disinformation rhetoric as Lindbergh’s words divide American Jews.

Lindbergh pushes antisemitic propaganda through his network in the form of assimilation programs that attempt to strip Jews of their identities and communities under the guise of stimulating American society. The programs are titled “Homestead 42” and “Just Folks.” Homestead 42 ties back to the Homestead Act, which gave farmers subsidized land for their labor. Just Folks is a populist attempt to present the initiative as relatable and community oriented. They are given misleading names to hide their duplicitous nature. The programs demand that Jews conform to Lindbergh’s ideas of what it means to be American. Lindbergh’s antisemitic propaganda incites turmoil within America’s Jewish population as his words and programs evoke fear and anger in some, but makes others question their own identity as Jews. This discord is best exemplified by Sanford “Sandy” Roth, Evelyn Finkel, Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf, and the Just Folks Program which serve as pivotal components of Lindbergh’s propaganda apparatus.

Sandy is an aspiring, naive child who fails to see through Lindbergh and succumbs to his propaganda. Sandy is characterized by others as truthful, well-behaved, and a gifted young child. He is Phil’s older brother who stands out from the rest of his family. Lindbergh’s ascension to presidency and bigoted programs compels Sandy to separate from his family and Jewish identity. Initially, Sandy shows some concern of the security of Jews in America, but not to the same degree as his family and neighbors. Phil and Sandy discuss the possibility of Lindbergh winning the presidential election. Sandy says, “he’s going to be president […] Lindbergh’s going to win” (25). The comment is almost as humorous as it is confusing for Phil. He asserts that nobody can win against Roosevelt. Sandy counters with “Lindbergh’s going to. America’s going to go fascist” (26). Yet, even with this awareness, Sandy still treasures his memory of Charles Lindbergh as a hero. He secretly keeps drawings he made of the aviator against his parents’ wishes and lies about tearing apart the illustrations. Sandy’s fib for the sake of preserving his image of Lindbergh foreshadows his betrayal of the Roth family as a result of Lindbergh’s propaganda.

The influence of Lindbergh’s propaganda on Sandy is reinforced by his employment under the Just Folks program where Sandy claims to work for the sake of his family, but really, he falls for Lindbergh’s assimilation rhetoric. While his parents, neighbors, Walter Winchell, and many others see the program as a threat to Jewish communities, Sandy sees it as an opportunity to move up in America. He begins working with Just Folks and the OAA to the dismay of his family. In defense of his actions, he insists that he is feigning being “a Lindbergh loyalist to protect us” (184). Phil knows this to be untrue and says that Sandy “discovered in himself the uncommon gift to be somebody.” He claims to be masquerading, but Lindbergh’s programs and rhetoric have the desired effect on Sandy. So, when Sandy makes speeches “praising President Lindbergh,” shows his drawings of the president, and promotes his time as “a Jewish farm hand in the Gentile heartland,” he’s doing what was “normal and patriotic all over America and aberrant and freakish only in his home” and is “having the time of his life” (184). His time with Just Folks and Lindbergh loyalists drastically shifts Sandy’s perspectives on American Jews and his own family. The author uses Sandy to convey how predatory propaganda tactics can effectively breach the minds of the youth. Sandy begins to separate himself from the other Roths and refers to them as “ghetto Jews” and “you people.” After a disagreement with his mother, Bess, Sandy tells Phil that they were “ghetto Jews […] frightened, paranoid ghetto Jews” (227). He uses harsh, racist language to ridicule his family for their fear of Lindbergh after proclaiming to work under the president for their safety. Sandy’s use of the words “paranoid” and “ghetto” belittle his family, and, by extension other Jews that are apprehensive about Lindbergh, as poor and irrational. He marginalizes his family, so he is less willing to listen to their criticisms of the president. This separation is propelled shortly after in an argument between Sandy and his father, Herman, about Walter Winchell’s opinions on the president. Sandy says that Walter Winchell spouts “more bullshit to get you people to tune in!” He refers to his family as “you people” two more times before his father retorts, “I know very well what ‘you people’ means. And so do you” (230). Sandy strains his bonds with his family after falling into the Just Folks trap. The program works as Lindbergh intended by dismantling the safety nets American Jews maintain through familial bonds and neighborhood communities. The physical and mental separation of young Jews from these safety nets allows Lindbergh to forward his fascist agenda more easily by turning Jews against one another. The added effect of incorporating young, impressionable Jews who seek to move up America’s social ladder is that it creates an almost pyramid scheme-esque structure. The young Jews entice others to join the program and the cycle continues, conserving coalescence under Lindbergh.

Additionally, Lindbergh’s propaganda not only turns Jews against each other; it also uses members of the Jewish community to make his anti-Semitic programs and legislation more acceptable to non-Jews. By selecting members of a community to be pawns of their propaganda network, propagandists can get the rest of the community to let their guards down and be more susceptible to the propaganda. This is exemplified through Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf who sells his Jewish identity at the cost of the rest of the community. Rabbi Bengelsdorf serves as Lindbergh’s Jewish representative and advocate. Lindbergh uses Bengelsdorf as a puppet for his propaganda by framing the rabbi as the voice of American Jews. Rabbi Bengelsdorf willingly plays into this role and hitches his wagon to Lindbergh. During one of the aviator’s campaign tours, Bengelsdorf is the first to greet him after a flight and gives an official statement saying, “I want Charles Lindbergh to be my president not in spite of my being a Jew but because I am a Jew—an American Jew” (36). The rabbi helps push the Lindbergh administration’s assimilation plans by supporting Lindbergh’s ideas of an American. His job is to mediate the anxieties and reservations people about the president. To some extent, Sandy did the same thing, but what makes the two characters different is that Sandy is a child who succumbed to the propaganda and, thus, perpetuated it. Rabbi Bengelsdorf works more closely with Lindbergh and makes the programs like Just Folks more appealing to people like Sandy. He exercises more control and power in his elevated position within Lindbergh’s political sphere. This is demonstrated by his speech at a dinner with the Roths in which Bengelsdorf says:

The Jews of America can participate fully in the national life of their country. They need no longer dwell apart, a pariah community separated from the rest. All that is required is the courage that your son Sandy displayed by going on his own into the unknown of Kentucky to work for the summer as a farm hand there. I believe that Sandy and the other Jewish boys like him in the Just Folks program should serve as models not only for every Jewish child growing up in this country but for every Jewish adult. And this is not merely a dream of mine; it is the dream of President Lindbergh (106-107).

Rabbi Bengelsdorf puts most of his effort into presenting Lindbergh as a benevolent leader seeking to invigorate the Jewish community of America. When he is not trying to sell Lindbergh’s assimilation programs, the rabbi is actively peddling disinformation to cover for the president. In a Lindbergh rally at Madison Square Garden, following concerns and questions about Lindbergh’s prior visits to Germany in 1936, Rabbi Bengelsdorf makes an appearance. He defends these visits claiming, “contrary to the propaganda disseminated by his critics,” Lindbergh never visited Germany as “a sympathizer or a supporter of Hitler’s.” Rather, Bengelsdorf asserts that Lindbergh always went as a “secret adviser to the U.S. government.” The rabbi concludes his defense of Lindbergh by stating that the meetings were to “preserve our democracy” and neutrality in the war (38). On the surface level, the rabbi’s defense of Lindbergh is similar to Sandy’s defense of working with Just Folks. They both claim that it is for the greater good of protecting their homes. But on another level, Bengelsdorf’s defense reroutes the conversation to isolationist policies. Just as Lindbergh frequently did with his binarization ploys, Bengelsdorf emulates in this speech. The impact of Bengelsdorf’s role is immediately felt as Phil highlights that “he finished his speech and was loudly cheered off the stage by the Garden audience” (40). His words and status carry a lot of weight in reinforcing Lindbergh’s words and goals. Alvin, Phil’s cousin, is the first to notice Rabbi Bengelsdorf’s exact purpose under Lindbergh. He notes that the rabbi is “koshering Lindbergh for the goyim.” He further elaborates that the rabbi was not selected to resonate with American Jews; instead, he was hired to give “the goyim all over the country his personal rabbi’s permission to vote for Lindy on Election Day” (40). On one hand, Rabbi Bengelsdorf does try to coax other Jews into accepting programs that would breakdown their own communities. He pushes for the Homestead 42 act and Just Folks with no regard for the people impacted by such institutions. On the other hand, Bengelsdorf works to develop tactics for Lindbergh that would make gentiles more complacent or ignorant to Lindbergh’s egregiously dishonest assimilation plans.

Ultimately, Lindbergh’s antisemitic propaganda and disinformation about Jews effectively paints them as outsider threats to America. He presents Jews as foreigners so that his assimilation plans become more acceptable to other Americans. Lindbergh creates a narrative and problem whose only solution is through conformity and homogeneity. He uses members of the Jewish community to evoke identity conflicts among younger Jews with Just Folks and representatives like Sandy. He further uses Jews to back his propaganda rhetoric and hide the anti-Semitic elements of his plans from non-Jewish Americans. In this way, Roth suggests that demagogues use propaganda networks to dismantle the solidarity of Americans from within. Bad actors understand the simple logic that a fragmented nation is easier to dominate than a unified front.

Lewis supports Roth’s suggestion that propagandists can expand their networks by exploiting the influence of public figures, exemplified by Windrip and his propaganda apparatus. Before he becomes president, Windrip’s system develops through the exploitation of radio broadcasts. He uses the character named Bishop Paul Peter Prang and the League of Forgotten Men organization to increase his following. Bishop Prang is a radio host who commands the attention of thousands to millions of Americans. His influence is so remarkable that he is regarded as a “political titan” who is a “rival to Senator Windrip in public reverence,” as “no man in history has ever had such an audience as Bishop Prang” (31). The League of Forgotten Men is Prang’s organization that has twenty-seven million followers. They remain loyal supporters of the bishop and adhere to his guidance. Windrip takes advantage of this and manipulates Prang to endorse his run for presidency by appealing to his views on economics and politics. He even includes a reference to the bishop in his autobiography, writing, “I have no desire to be President. I would much rather do my humble best as a supporter of Bishop Prang” (142). Buzz continues to use his promises of economic prosperity in America to puppeteer Prang. Just as Windrip’s economic promises resonate with the radio host, Prang extends pro-Windrip sentiments and rhetoric to his large base. As Doremus infers, in the event that Bishop Prang swings his League of Forgotten Men in favor of Buzz, he will win and “people will think they’re electing him to create more economic security” (16). Lewis indicates that propagandists and demagogues will use people with established bases to graft unto their own following, like a parasite. Windrip’s influence is visible in Prang’s endorsement announcement in which he states, “it is, as Senator Berzelius Windrip puts it, ‘the zero hour,’ now, this second” (42). The bishop’s zero hour comment directly references Windrip’s autobiography; the same one that he used to in his populist approach. Prang declares that they will “use the tremendous strength of the millions of League members” to ensure the “Democratic presidential nomination” goes to Senator Berzelius Windrip, which will all but guarantee Buzz’s victory in the presidential election (42). Thus, Windrip develops a potent propaganda network by simply acquiring the support of Bishop Prang and gaining his followers with him. He maximizes the utility of radio broadcasting by deceiving a popular radio host and his prolific followers into carrying him to victory.

Buzz Windrip’s network is more heavy handed, expansive, and assertive than Lindbergh’s. This is due to Windrip’s establishment of a corporate state through a party called the American Corporate State and Patriotic Party that comprised of partisan businesspeople and organizations that are Windrip loyalists. The members of the party are called Corporatists, nicknamed “Corpos.” Corpos serve as one of Windrip’s primary forms of propaganda distribution. Unlike Lindbergh, who generally ignored contentious viewpoints and propaganda about him, Windrip and his Corpos actively suppress nonconforming rhetoric in every media channel. In this way, Lewis and Roth demonstrate the different ways propagandists respond to counterinformation. Roth shows that propagandists can ignore their detractors; and Lewis indicates that propagandists can prevent information from reaching the public. During his ascension to presidency, Windrip removes billboards along highways and Americans consider that he is doing it to increase the appeal of the area. Doremus Jessup recalls when old editors declared that Windrip’s “driven all these unsightly billboards off the highways” as a point in Windrip’s favor. However, when Doremus drives on a highway, he sees “hundreds of huge billboards by the road. But they bore only Windrip propaganda” (147). The billboards were sponsored by various Corpos businesses and doubled as advertisements for firms, foot soaps, and cigarettes, etc. Windrip did not get rid of the old billboards for the sake of aesthetics and to honor the requests of Americans; he did it to create ad space for himself. Lewis propounds that propagandists seek to monopolize the information landscape. Fascist propagandists, like Windrip, achieve monopolization by strategically tearing down competitors.

The Corpos rely on this active repression of media to disseminate pro-Windrip propaganda and leave little to no room for any competitors or detractors to spread information that threatens their agenda. In addition to controlling the media, Windrip’s propaganda network disperses disinformation on a large scale. Their use of disinformation is effective at increasing Windrip’s domination over counterpropaganda and factual information that attempts to undermine his presidency. While Windrip is president, there is a war of information. Journalists, Corpos, and other organizations, like the New Underground (N.U.), spread a massive amount of rhetoric to Americans. The New Underground is a collective of revolutionist-journalists that wield the power of printed press to attack Windrip’s dictatorship. But Windrip’s network is so large and consolidates an immense amount of power, preventing other organizations from effectively under cutting him. Doremus notes that “the propaganda throughout the country was not all to the New Underground; not even most of it,” that status belongs to the Corpos. The N.U. contains hundreds of journalists but they “were cramped by a certain respect for facts which never enfeebled the press-agents for Corpoism” (283). The Corpos peddle as much disinformation as they desire to control perspectives on Buzz. Doremus remarks about how disheartening this is uphill battle can be. He says, “their feeble pamphlets, their smearily printed newspaper, seemed futile against the enormous blare of Corpo propaganda” (288). In sticking only to printing the truth, the N.U. and other organizations cannot keep up with the amount of rhetoric the Corpos produce. Consequentially, Windrip maintains authority over the information being circulated to the public.

Lewis and Roth craft Windrip’s and Lindbergh’s complex propaganda networks to represent how bad actors attempt to disperse widespread disinformation. The antagonists manipulate others into spreading their propaganda. In obtaining the backing of certain political figures, the fascists open up more ways for them to reach wider audiences. Rabbi Bengelsdorf and Bishop Prang allow them to secure a large portion of America’s support. The religious, political figures pave the way for the fascists to reach presidency more productively. Lindbergh further uses characters like Sandy to convince young Jews to separate from their families while also causing some Jews to let their guards down against Lindbergh’s assimilation tactics. Windrip’s Corpos-state allows him to control more of the media and push more propaganda. In understanding how these networks operate, Lewis and Roth propose that Americans can be more observant of the potential manipulation tactics going on behind the scenes.

**Section III: Responsibilities of the People**

Sinclair Lewis and Philip Roth are not merely cautioning about the ways in which fascists maneuver through democratic systems to obtain authority; the authors are also concerned with critiquing the ways in which people respond to these tactics. It is through the people, after all, that the fascists acquire their seats in the presidential office. They are voted into power through democratic means, and it is this condition of fascism in America that inspires the novelists to examine American culture through the lenses of the nation’s people. Benjamin Stolberg, a reviewer of Lewis’s book in 1935, remarked that the novel “has successfully plagiarized our social atmosphere” (Meyer). The novels include an assortment of characters across different socioeconomic classes that offer distinct perspectives on the situations unfolding throughout the stories. As Roth puts it, “each person in the family responds to it differently” (New York Times). The diverse characters create a microcosm of America’s social environment as many philosophies and ideas arise for the reader to consider. However, Roth and Lewis are straightforward in their exploration of America’s social culture under fascism. They opt to guide readers to what the novelists regard as virtues of Americans under the siege of fascism. Through the dissection of the potential reactions and morals of Americans, the authors represent the virtues of proactivity and resistance, conversely, they disapprove of inaction and complacency.

**Proactivity and Resistance**

Lewis and Roth emphasize the importance of proactivity as a means of combatting fascists’ advances. This is demonstrated through the themes of journalism and rebellion that appear in both novels. In *It Can’t Happen Here,* journalism is a critical form of resistance against Windrip, as discussed earlier. The theme is carried forward by Doremus Jessup. He is the owner of a newspaper, the “Daily Informer,” and lives by liberal virtues that serve as the paradigm of American values during the time. Doremus plays a more proactive role in the book as he is one of the more important characters to pushback against Windrip from the beginning of the novel to the end. Before Windrip’s election, Doremus calls out his fascists tendencies and uses his paper to condemn Buzz. Doremus “in both editorials and news stories he went after Buzz Windrip and his gang with whips, turpentine, and scandal” (86). Doremus’s uses the press to hold Windrip accountable throughout the novel. After Windrip turns America into a fascist regime, his cabinet exploit the corrupted system to get away with serious crimes, like murder. Doremus takes issue with this and reports on a murder by a high ranking government official. Some of his companions warn Doremus that he may be jailed or murdered. He responds, “I know […] But I can’t go on standing things” like murder any longer (173, 174). His commitment to informing the public of Windrip’s administration not only convey the importance of free press, but the significance of maintaining integrity.

The value of journalism as a method of resistance is further conveyed by Walt Trowbridge and his newspaper, “A Lance for Democracy.” Trowbridge is the presidential candidate who loses to Windrip in the 1936 election. After Windrip enacts his authoritarian plans, Trowbridge flees to Canada and establishes his newspaper and escape network called the “New Underground.” Trowbridge, using an apparatus of counter revolutionaries, smuggles information into the United States in his papers. “To Doremus Jessup, to some thousands of Doremus Jessups, were smuggled copies of the Lance, though possession of it was punishable (perhaps not legally, but certainly effectively) by death” (162). Doremus and Trowbridge stand in for the importance of journalism, and eventually, the power of rebellion. Trowbridge and Buzz both utilize propaganda, but Trowbridge’s paper only publishes the truth, maintaining its integrity. Information becomes an effective way of undermining Windrip’s lies. Windrip’s countermeasures to the press become overbearing as he takes over and censors the Daily Informer; journalists, like Doremus and Trowbridge are left only with the option of rebelling. Through the integrity of journalism, Lewis propounds the necessity of resistance and action.

In *The Plot Against America*, Roth offers a similar thought in the form of Walter Winchell and his radio journalism. Winchell is a very proactive member of the Jewish community. Just as Doremus publicly denounces Windrip in the Daily Informer, Winchell criticizes Lindbergh and warns his Jewish listeners of the brewing anti-Jewish environment that the president was creating. Winchell frequently counters the statements and propositions of Lindbergh. Early in the novel, Winchell calls “Lindbergh’s presidential candidacy the greatest threat ever to American democracy” (20). Though some characters try to dismiss him as an alarmist, Winchell is an important voice of reason to his thirty million listeners. Herman Roth states that these millions of people trust Winchell’s words and opinions. He maintains a sense of integrity, so much so that “Franklin Roosevelt confided to Walter Winchell things he would never tell another newspaperman” (231). Winchell uses his radio as a form of counterpropaganda to resist Lindbergh’s fascism. Eventually, Winchell is removed from the air with the allegations of being an alarmist. And just as Doremus turns to rebellion when his paper was censored, Winchell decides to be proactive and run for president. Roth’s depiction of Winchell, above all else, reinforces the themes of journalism via mass communication being a potent tool at the disposal of Americans. Just as Lindbergh weaponized mass communication for his rhetoric, Americans with a spirit of integrity can combat propaganda with counterinformation.

In *The Plot Against America* and *It Can’t Happen Here*, actions of youthful resistance are also emphasized to offer a sense of how proactivity in politics manifest in younger generations. This is best exemplified through the young Alvin Roth and Sissy Jessup. In Roth’s novel, twenty-year-old Alvin is quick to recognize the reality of the situation before him and catch onto many of Lindbergh’s schemes. He is described as the “renegade” of the family and is quite rebellious. Because of his personality and strong feelings of obligation to Jews and his country, Alvin decides to join the Canadian army to fight with “the British against Hitler” (25). Alvin’s passion to do what’s right for his people drives him to fearlessly join the war effort. Roth does not necessarily suggest that Alvin went about it the correct way, however. When Alvin returns to the Roths, he is seriously injured and permanently scarred. Nonetheless, the significance of Alvin’s choice is that despite his youth, he chooses to carry the responsibility of resistance for the sake of defending those he loves. Similarly, in Lewis’s novel, there is Cecilia “Sissy” Jessup. She is the youngest of the Jessup children and is Doremus’s determined eighteen year old daughter who serves as a bridge between her father’s liberal values and the younger generation’s progressive virtues. In a similar fashion to Doremus, she also plays a proactive role in the narrative, later becoming a rebel against Windrip’s regime. Sissy is the primary reason that a member of Windrip’s regime is killed. She tricks him with the idea of romantic interest and has him sent to a concentration camp where he is burned alive. The act makes her sick, all killing disgusts her, “she found no heroism but only barbaric bestiality in having to kill.” Yet, for the sake of protecting her family and resisting Windrip’s fascist overreach, “she knew that she would be willing to do it again” (337, 338). Sissy compromises her morals in the pursuit of liberty and, like Alvin, there is a cost to her resistance of fascism.

Lewis and Roth highlight the virtue of proactivity and resistance, but they are open about the cost of such traits. Journalists, like Doremus and Winchell, face imprisonment or death, yet they publicly chastise the dictators regardless. Sissy has to cope with her role in the murder of another person. Despite it revolting her, she comes to terms with the idea that she must resists the weight of the regime. Likewise, Alvin’s rebellion comes with a sacrifice. He returns with a stump from an amputated leg and Roth conveys the charged implications of Alvin’s injury. In a discussion with Phil, Alvin says that the stump will take “forever” to heal. Phil says, “I was stunned. Then this is endless! (Roth 137). Alvin’s sacrifice is bearing the trauma of antisemitism forever as a scar on his body, a physical and mental reminder of his choice.

**Inaction and Complacency**

Conversely, Sinclair Lewis and Philip Roth condemn complacency and passivity as traits that, at best, are counterproductive to efforts of subverting fascism, and at worst, contribute to its functionality. Roth conveys this through various characters, but it is best exemplified by Rabbi Bengelsdorf. Lewis also thoroughly covers this and explores it through the Jessups.

Complacency and inaction are one of the more central problems that lead to the rise of fascism in Lewis’s America. A significant theme throughout the novel is how naivety and denial lead to many Americans letting their guard down against an actual home-grown threat. This is first implicated in the title of the text: *It Can’t Happen Here*. The title calls attention towards sentiments of American exceptionalism, which insist that America was invulnerable to issues that plagued every other nation on the globe. The presence of exceptionalism is made immediately clear following a radio broadcast from Bishop Prang which contained undertones of fascism. Despite this occurrence, Philip Jessup, the eldest son of the protagonist, reinforces ideas of denial that derive from exceptionalism. Philip says, “dictatorship? […] America’s the only free nation on Earth,” before concluding with “no, no! Couldn’t happen here” (43). When the question of a possible dictatorship within the USA arises, characters that succumb to exceptionalism are quick to dismiss the extent of the threat, a point later demonstrated by the character Emma Jessup, the protagonist’s apolitical wife. This arises after Windrip gives a roadmap of his plan for America, which contains obvious leanings towards oligarchy and civil rights violations. Emma’s response to the rising likelihood of dictatorship raises the question will: “Americans stand for it long?” She asserts that “people like us – the descendants of the pioneers”, i.e., fellow Americans, wouldn’t allow for that to happen (66). Yet, Emma’s point blatantly ignores that other Americans were the ones propelling Windrip to power in the first place. He was not some foreign political usurper, but rather another American who was using democracy to scale the presidential rungs of the political ladder.

Moreover, the denial, naivety, and complacency that lend themselves to inaction prove to be more far-reaching than just a reactionary denial of potential threats to democracy. That is to say that, in Lewis’s book, stubbornness, denial, and complacency linger in American consciousness even after being confronted with the horrible reality of fascism in America. The persistent refusal to believe that democracy could be manipulated by authoritarianism leads to a slower reaction in rooting that authoritarianism out. Lewis exemplifies this with the main protagonist, Doremus Jessup. Even though Windrip wins the 1936 presidential election, and that Windrip’s Minute Men do not refrain from using violence against Windrip detractors, Doremus, who admittedly calls out Windrip early on for being a fascist in disguise, still displays this lingering sense of denial. Following all of these events, the novel notes that Doremus “simply did not believe that this comic tyranny could endure […] *It can’t happen here* […] even now” (143). The consequences of such a delayed realization are made apparent later when after a fascist was already placed in office, America was placed in martial law, political executions had occurred, government imposed censorship was on the rise, and labor camps were established, Doremus realizes that “it can happen here" (243). Lewis later adds that everyone “had said in 1935” that if a fascist dictatorship ever did arise in the United States, “American humor and pioneer independence are so marked that it will be absolutely different from anything in Europe” (284). Lewis’s criticism of denial and inaction is poignant; he regards it as an issue that allows fascism to grow.

Doremus’s moment of denial is brief and rectified by his moment of active resistance, but he stands in juxtaposition to his son, Philip, who remains apathetic and intolerant. Philip is Doremus eldest son. He is a lawyer who is initially dismissive of Windrip as threat. Though, over the course of Windrip’s rise to power, Philip becomes supportive of Windrip’s fascist policies believing them to be in the best interest of America. In an argument with his son, Doremus reminds Philip of the recent murder of a close family friend, asking if Philip condones such murder for supporting Windrip. Philip responds, “no! Certainly not […] no one abhors violence more than I do. Still, you can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs——” (238). Doremus is immediately distressed. Philip treats human lives like eggshells to be stepped on by the like of Windrip and his administration. His complacency under fascism is enabled by a grave sense of apathy. Lewis demonstrates that it is this type of apathy-driven inaction that allows fascists to get away with atrocities. The fascists may use excuses, such as the ends justify the means, but in lacking the emotional investment in others, individuals like Philip fail to be compelled to do what is right.

**Conclusion**

Sinclair Lewis and Philip Roth provide cautionary tales that effectively experiment with history to express the once prevalent anxieties about fascism in America; though, they probably did not intentionally seek to create a framework that could be applied to contemporary issues. Sinclair Lewis wrote *It Can’t Happen Here* after the Great Depression and before World War II. It was a time branded by uncertainty, desperation, and fear. His novel captures the essence of the ‘30s American social climate in a bottle. In Lewis’s time, newspapermen made statements like, “whenever you hear a prominent American called a ‘Fascist,’ you can usually make up your mind that the man is simply a LOYAL CITIZEN WHO STANDS FOR AMERICANISM” (Meyer and Lewis ix). In his period, these concerns of fascism in America were more real than ever before. Lewis did not know of what was to come and could not predict or prophesize America’s social climate nearly a century later. And, even though Roth wrote his novel in 2004, he did not intend to create a work for the modern climate. He only sought to “illuminate the past through the past” (New York Times). And so, Lewis and Roth created alternative, political fictions about fascism in WWII America. But, regardless of intention, I argue that there is value in analyzing these novels that extends beyond a window into the ‘30s and ‘40s.

All of the points suggested by Lewis and Roth are still applicable to today’s political atmosphere. Populism is alive and well in the political sphere and is used by traditional and extreme politicians alike. Figures like Donald Trump, considered by many to be a demagogue, continue “a tradition of appealing for the votes of the "common man" by combining tough talk against malevolent elites with ugly scapegoating of marginalized groups” (Postel). The weaponization of populism remains ever present. The same goes for radical binarization or political polarization, which seems to be widening between liberals and conservatives, and the developments of propaganda networks like Fox news and Truth Social. The reflections of the past in the modern day demonstrate the validity and longevity of Lewis’s and Roth’s depictions of fascism as a considerable threat to democracy. Even if the conditions of WWII are not replicated in today’s climate, the “seeds” of fascism still lurk beneath the surface.

To this end, the authors offer perceptive warnings against autocratic behavior; but they also provide a timeless message about how crucial it is to remain proactive and resistant to oppression. The novelists incorporate ideas that inspire action from all generations, as the books depict these values of resistance and proactivity in the younger and older generations. By creating microcosms of American culture, Lewis and Roth convey the importance of recognizing what a fascist looks like, the tactics that they are using, and the ways in which Americans can respond to the threat. In this way, America may be vulnerable to fascism, but this weakness can be rectified by remaining vigilant and avoiding complacency.

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