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American Political Fictions: From Philip Roth to the White House

God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation and self-admiration. No. He made us master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigned. He has given us the spirit of progress to overwhelm the forces of reaction throughout the earth. He has made us adept in government that we may administer government among savage and senile peoples. Were it not for such a force as this the world would relapse into barbarism and night. And of all our race He has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the redemption of the world.

Albert J. Beveridge, United States Senator (1900)

I

In the last year of the nineteenth century, the Commissioner of the United States Patent and Trademark Office wrote a memo to President McKinley, advising him to close the office because everything that could be invented has already been invented. The story was so good that for decades it made rounds in the popular media. In May 1987 Reagan's speechwriters even worked it into the address the president delivered to graduating students in a local highschool in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Once endorsed by the President of the United States — no matter that it was the one whom even his official biographer summed up as “an apparent airhead” — the story got legs, racing around the country by word of mouth, then mouse, gaining in credibility every

time it was trotted out as a quantum of American federal history¹. Except that it was not.

The public officer who was supposed to have so ill-advised McKinley was Charles Holland Duell, head of the Patent Office between 1898 and 1901. Trouble is, as Samuel Sass and other historians established beyond any doubt, reasonable or not, there is not one shred of historical evidence that the memorable memo has ever existed. Despite a century of political make-believe going all the way up to the Oval Office, the story has no grounding in fact. It is, in short, a great piece of American political fiction.

The Office of the President of the United States is, of course, not the only source of memorable political make-believe. At the other end of the spectrum from organized politics lies a different variety of American political fiction. Here you will find American art that, in one way or another, gives the finger to art for art's sake in order to roll up its sleeves and practice grassroots democracy or, at any rate, revisionist history.

Pressed for an iconic example of political fiction, many literary scholars might point to the abiding monument of American letters, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1904 in serialized form). Written by an American and published in the United States, this work of prose fiction plots a theme resonant in socioeconomic overtones: the plight of immigrant slave-wage earners in the turn-of-the-century slaughterhouses of Chicago. And here problems begin to mount.

Although Sinclair's classic is typecast as a political novel, in reality it has little to say about politics, especially in the self-censored version canonized in more than eight hundred editions worldwide. Having deleted almost all references to Socialism and the Socialist Party of America — including a portable biography of its erstwhile leader, Eugene Debs — Sinclair turned a working-class novel into one about meat-packing industry, as attested by his post-publication lament that he aimed for the country's heart and by mistake hit it in the stomach.

Moreover, *The Jungle* is an atypical work of fiction, underwritten by Sinclair's seven-week stint around the Chicago abattoirs of Armour, Swift and Morris as an investigative reporter for the Socialist magazine,

¹ Morris, 579; for Patent Office myth, see *The Economist* (13 April, 1991), 83.

The Appeal to Reason. Sinclair codified this documentary aesthetics in a 1903 essay “My Cause”, his artistic declaration of independence. Three years later, agonizing over the cuts he had inflicted on *The Jungle* to see it picked up by a commercial publisher, he said that his error lay in supposing that it is fiction that makes life, not the other way round.

In general, equivocating American political fiction with socially-concerned prose written by Americans is problematic from the start. Take Alistair Beaton’s *A Planet for the President* (2004), a mother of all satires on the United States, its recent gunboat presidency, and its not so recent quest for world hegemony. Between partisan broadsides and demotic slang, executed with a bravura reminiscent of Mark Twain in one of his more vitriolic moods, this White House-centred burlesque is as American as they come. Yet it was penned by a Scotsman.

When it comes to equivocating fiction with novelistic prose, the mismatch is, if anything, even more gaping. Rap, that quintessentially American genre of cultural expression, is almost by nature countercultural, oppositional, and — with a regularity that is far from accidental — political. On the other hand, no matter how much the academic rearguard might try to close its eyes and ears to the greatest explosion of rhyming American poetry since the Harlem renaissance, no one could mistake rap lyrics for narrative prose.

Similarly flying under the critical radar are political cartoons, the syndicated pictorial punches, on occasion reinforced by one-line punchlines, that entertain and instruct millions of newspaper, magazine, and podcast readers day in day out. No one could confuse these political fictions with narrative prose as in wordless frames they draw and quarter the American body politic for our amusement and edification.

For that matter, not even the most popular political fiction in the history of American artertainment falls under the heading of literary prose, having cornered the airwaves with a synergy of image, spoken word, and music. Like *The Jungle*, to boot, *The West Wing* elected to steep its fiction in real-life, liberally borrowing from recent political history, starting with the government shutdown during Clinton’s tussle with Gingrich-led House and ending with the ‘chicken suits’ episode from the Arkansas governor’s ’92 election trail.

It was this high-octane mixture of political fact and fiction that endeared this White House soap to ten million-plus viewers who tuned in every week during its seven-year Emmy-studded run. With Aaron Sorkin, principal writer and mastermind of the show, bossing a cadre of fulltime researchers, with D.D. Myers, Clinton's first press secretary, and Peggy Newman, Bush Senior's speechwriter, among script consultants, with Eli Attie, speechwriter for Gore, penning so many episodes in the latter seasons, this was one political fiction that has done its political homework.

Truth being no stranger to fiction, *The West Wing* even made political history by supplying a readymade blueprint for Britain's Conservative Party 2006 rebellion by stealth against Tony Blair. In one episode from its valedictory season, Democratic lawmakers pretend to flock out of Washington before a vote on stem cell research, duping the Republican speaker into calling the vote under the illusion that it will not face much opposition. "That's where the idea came from," affirmed the ringleader of the British MPs who copied this stealth tactics. "It was directly inspired by the West Wing"².

No discussion of American political fiction would be complete, of course, without turning the spotlight onto political speeches, orations, manifestos, stump pledges, electoral pamphlets, campaign trail communiqués, congressional addresses, policy papers, and even occasional State of the Union grandiloquence. All rain on the electorate with the avowed purpose of conveying the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Yet, with a regularity that shocks even as it fails to surprise, they morph into fiction every time another 'you have to sit on it before you can put it in your mouth' whopper is prodded into light.

No matter if it is the solemn promise to close Guantanamo within a year of moving into the Office, the 'slam dunk' case of Iraqi non-existent WMDs, the false truth of 'I did not have sexual relations with that woman', the peddling of arms to Iran to finance an overtly covert war outlawed by Congress, the hand-over-the-heart protestations of 'I am not a crook', the escalation of wars in Southeast Asia after pledging not to do so, or countless other political fictions. American politics

² Carlin *et al.*, online.

or American political art? No matter — both call for a suspension of disbelief.

George Carlin used to sneer that, if honesty is the best policy, then by elimination dishonesty must rank as second-best. Calculated inexactitude, if not outright mendacity, is indeed the true and tried policy of the bipartisan spin machine that keeps selling American political fictions to the electorate, beginning with the holy gospel of market economy and American democracy. With the American body politic plagued by chronic and acute mendacity, one would expect writers and critics to lead the campaign to eradicate these multiple strains of the foot-in-the-mouth disease. After all, as even Aristotle observed in the days of the Aeropagus, man is by nature a political animal.

George Orwell underscored this point in the year he penned *Animal Farm*: “No book is genuinely free of political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude.”³ And yet, equivocating politics with political attitude, Orwell opened the door to equivocating political fiction with practically anything under the sun. A textbook example of how diluted the term has become in contemporary criticism comes from a recent *Times Literary Supplement*.

A review of a collection of shorts by an American writer, Lorrie Moore, unhesitatingly calls the leading story “overtly political”⁴. To the unsuspecting reader the marker might evoke a vision of America’s elected officials, legislative power-players, partisan kingpins, electoral spin doctors, and political playmakers thrashing out their agendas. Not so. As the review makes clear, while commenting on social injustice, the ‘overtly political’ story has exactly zero to say about any aspect of the political process as it is understood by political scientists, Capitol Hill pundits, policy wonks, PAC strategists, NGO think-tanks, and not least politicians themselves — in short, by people whose job descriptions testify to their involvement in politics.

These days it is fashionable to slap the label ‘political’ on almost any kind of cultural production in the name of radicalizing humanistic discourse and presumably making it more relevant to society at large.

³ Orwell, 318; for dilution of the term ‘political’, see Swirski (2010).

⁴ Kelly, 19.

And the more things get upgraded to the status of being ‘political’, from transgender erotica to the rural imaginary to ecocritical mythography to consumer product advertising, the more the term becomes meaningless. After all, logically speaking, where everything is political, nothing is.

The flip side of this process is the marginalization of art that actually tries to say something meaningful about politics, and the corresponding marginalization of critical alternatives to threadbare exhortations of Marxist vintage. Both, in turn, feed back into American culture at large where political art is defined by sleepers like the 2008 *Che*. Making a bio-epic about a rabid revolutionary, Soderbergh and his writers managed to produce the near-impossible: a four-hour ‘political’ film almost wholly devoid of politics⁵.

The absence of politics in American fiction and, as a consequence, in the critical nonfiction mounted in response to it plays into the hands of those who would keep political fictions and their authors — be they literary artists or political con-artists — out of the public eye. Hence in an attempt to reclaim the term ‘political’ in American art and culture, I divide my attention equally between the errors of omission and commission that make the Hill and the White House such hotbeds of American political fictions and Philip Roth’s novel *The Plot Against America* (2004).

II

As sociologists from Weber to Merton to Mills have observed, every political system has built-in compensatory mechanisms to enhance its longevity. In the United States this primary safety-valve is the quadrennial reality TV show known as presidential elections. Even as voters trudge to the voting booth under the illusion that they choose the CEO of the USA, behind their backs party bosses dressed up as caucuses and electoral-college bigwigs steal the show.

Sometimes, however, their theft is caught on candid camera, as it was in the ratings-stealing episode aired on November 7, 2000. Most Americans remember the putsch that robbed many black Florida voters

⁵ See, Calder, Swirski (2010).

of their ballots, whipped up a media stampede to prematurely declare Bush II the winner, and flung itself into the arms of Reagan's Supreme Court which stopped the recount that would have duly sent Gore to the White House.

But this made-for-TV episode of *Big Brother* hid an even more inconvenient truth. Nationwide, in the popular vote Gore came home with a solid victory over his rival. If America were a democracy in which the people elect the president, he would have become POTUS no. 43. Instead, the electorate got a guy they did *not* elect — the guy who got more than a million *fewer* votes than his opponent. Much like the closure of the Patent and Trademark Office, American presidential elections and American democracy are great American political fictions⁶.

You do not need a sociologist, of course, to see through the fiction of market economy. The rallying cry of Clinton's 1992 election, 'It's the economy, stupid', only provided a mass-media slogan for the fundamental connection between the myth of American democracy and the myth of unregulated, market-driven prosperity. Both myths were laid bare on countless occasions, starting with Charles Austin Beard's political bombshell concealed behind the drab title of *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913).

Giving the lie to the political and economic pieties on which the republic stands, the historian documented the full extent to which the Constitutional Convention and the Constitution itself were framed by the vested economic stakes of its elite signatories. George Washington, to take one example, was the largest landowner in the thirteen colonies who lobbied long and hard to ensure that his revolutionary war debts would be paid back with interest.

The same protectionist and regulatory economic regime that ran the freshly minted country on the backs of African slaves continues to run it on the backs of today's American wage-slaves. Mind you, although die-hard opponents scoff at the idea, free markets guided by the 'invisible hand' of Smith and Ricardo can, indeed, work the way they said it should. However, this is so *only if* a number of fundamental conditions are in place, starting with the presence of multiple independent rational wealth

⁶ See Swirski (2011), Chapter 2.

maximizers with equal access to reliable and accurate information about the transparent market. All must trade on equal terms, with no barriers to impede the stream of new buyers and traders, with none powerful enough to skew the market by influencing the price.

Ask yourself: when ever did even these basic preconditions hold true in the United States, or for that matter anywhere in the industrialized world? Of course, compared to the rigidly regulated economy of the former Soviet Union, the American market *is* free. Like in academia, it is all a matter of degree. But, myth-making aside, the American economy is planned, overseen, intervened in, and bailed out in keeping with the socialist policies jointly enforced by the Fed and the feds.

The writ of Milton Friedman, George Stigler, and other neoliberal (in today's parlance, neoconservative) founding fathers of the Chicago School — gurus of shock-doctrine privatization, deregulation, and social program cutbacks — invariably omits to highlight these 'ifs' behind their theorizing. Indeed, in his resolve to cast economic theory as a mathematically reliable science in his classic *Capitalism and Freedom*, Friedman plays down the fact that laissez-faire logic is only as good as its premises which are nonstarters from the get-go⁷.

An average citizen is reluctant to pass judgment on the economy and the economists because he feels — and is made to feel — that he is not expert enough to follow the jargon and mathematics used by specialists. As a result, John and Jane Doe fall back on sound-bites such as 'less intervention is better', 'market economy', 'the invisible hand', while the country falls in line with Harding's deregulatory dream of less government in business and more business in government.

Just like the apocryphal story about the closing of the Patent and Trademark Office, the fiction of market economy gains in stature every time it is mouthed off by politicians of all stripes, regardless of what assumptions these principles actually rest on. Look up Adam Smith, however, and you will discover that, even as he hailed the aggregated wisdom of the marketplace, he insisted that essential

⁷ See Alan Blinder, vice-chairman of the Federal Reserve System under Clinton, for a frontal assault on Friedman's programs of economic austerity and political repression, see Klein.

public good required a strong government, a fact conveniently ignored by neocon ideologues.

Instead, deregulation of banking, accounting, and financial markets, first in the 1980s and now in the 2000s, paved the way for meltdowns that wiped out trillions of dollars in shareholder value, exposing the palliatives about trickle-down economy for what they are: political fictions. And while an Ivan Boesky or a Charles Keating may get caught here and there, and even get sidelined for a few years in a Club Fed penitentiary, modern-day multinational robber-barons are permitted to declare bankruptcy and walk away from bad debts, crippled companies, and crushed dreams⁸.

When it comes to the economy, everyone is equally stupid. In August 1993, New Gingrich, then the leading Republican in the House, scare-mongered America with: “The tax increase [in Clinton’s tax and budget package] will kill jobs and lead to a recession, and the recession will force people off of work and onto unemployment and will actually increase the deficit”⁹. Experts such as Phil Gramm, Chairman of the Senate Banking Committee and former economics professor, echoed this gloom and doom:

We are buying a one way ticket to recession. I want to predict here tonight that if we adopt this bill, the American economy is going to get weaker and not stronger, the deficit four years from today will be higher than it is today and not lower.

What happened was exactly the opposite. After passing Clinton’s budget, the United States economy chalked up one hundred and fifteen months of expansion, the longest period of uninterrupted economic growth in history. During eight years of Clinton’s administration unemployment dipped to four percent as 22 million new jobs were created, more than under Reagan and Father Bush combined. And if your sympathies lie with millionaires and billionaires, corporate wealth grew at a record pace.

⁸ See, for example, Hardt and Negri; Swirski (2009); for a sideways look at Keating, see Schlosser’s chapter “An Empire of the Obscene” in (2004).

⁹ This and following quote in Conason, 78.

The truth is that the national economy is so enormous, so complex, and as a result so unpredictable that even the so-called experts often do not know what they are talking about. That being the case, there is every reason to question the premises of laissez-faire economy, all the more so that successive American governments, no matter if Democratic or Republican, make a mockery of it anyway. Every time it comes to the bottom line, the vaunted market economy is exposed for exactly what it is: a great American political fiction.

In November 2006 the CEOs of the Big Three automobile companies went cap in hand to the White House to ask for interventionist (and thus protectionist) handouts because they could not cope with the market competition from Asian and European manufacturers. This after persistently scorning to retool away from gas-guzzling minivans and SUVs and enter the economy car/hybrid market. Late in 2008 their socialist agenda was approved by the allegedly pro-laissez-faire Bush II administration.

At about the same time Bush and Cheney were twisting the rubber arms of Congressional lawmakers to earmark seven hundred thousand million dollars to keep sinking financial institutions afloat in what became the largest bailout of banks and mortgage companies in history. Who is paying for this interventionist socialism? The individual taxpayer stuck with the interest on these enormous sums for decades to come — on the best-case scenario — while millionaires like Romney and billionaires like Buffet enjoy the lowest tax rates in the nation.

What happened to the vaunted laissez-faire? To free-market competition? To keeping the government out of business? To the hatred of ‘socialist’ interventions? With one hand America doles out hundreds of billions of welfare dollars to major capitalists, while the other hand holds the hymnbook from which it preaches the gospel of the free market. And if you put your money where your mouth is, you will pay for it. In the March 2012 Republican primaries Romney suffered a setback in his home state of Michigan as car-industry workers punished him for sticking by market economy and voting against the bailout of the Big Three.

The bailouts for Big Business and Big Banking — starting symbolically with the Bank of America — only conceal the fact that

free-market competition doesn't come into its own even at the grassroots level. From a welter of examples, the 1937 protectionist action by the New York City cabbies is as instructive as any. Pressuring the Tammany Hall to limit the number of taxis, the 'hacks' prevented all would-be competitors from entering the market and offering cheaper fares, in the end hurting not only the paying public but also the depression-era jobless seeking work in the taxi trade¹⁰.

The myth of market economy is just that — a myth. Yet, like the foundational myths of equal opportunity, rags to Rockefellers, classless society, and other abiding American fictions, *laissez faire* continues to be nationally syndicated via the press, the internet, schools, Hollywood, television, and other mass-media/mass-culture outlets. Inevitably, there are communities and even entire social classes who get so hung up on the American Dream that they cannot distinguish it from reality.

Those who can blow off steam in public protests that rarely make it into the media or in blood-letting in urban insurrections that always do. The 1992 Los Angeles riots were just one chapter in a long history of violent social unrest. And the next day, like everyday, America gets up and goes to work with a hangover of a *Walpurgisnacht* of its own making. But judging by the status quo, however costly in human and material terms, regular market-led meltdowns are the price America is willing to pay for not overhauling the political system.

'Political' is right for you do not have to look far for a culprit. Each year lobbyists spend more than two million dollars for *each* member of Congress. That same Congress collectively genuflects to business when it comes to regulation, after which it hands out massive financial welfare to too-big-to-fail banks and corporations when they fail because there were no regulations to keep their excesses in check. That same Congress which has triple-mortgaged the country's future while taking liberties with its constitutional past.

On 21 January, 2011, a Minnesota Congresswoman and tea-party stalwart, Michelle Bachman, took it on herself to teach Iowans for Tax Relief rally something about slavery. It was a terrible thing, conceded

¹⁰ Cabbies example in Bryson and McKay, 24; on regulated economy, see Goldin and Libecap.

the politician, but “we also know that the very founders that wrote those documents worked tirelessly until slavery was no more in the United States”¹¹. This was only one of several political falsehoods from an elected representative of the people who made a point of toting a pocket edition of the Constitution in her pocket.

For the record: the Emancipation Proclamation was signed in 1863 by which time all the founding fathers were dead. Even so, the proclamation did not actually free the slaves: it freed slaves only in the confederate South, while saying nothing about the victorious North. Only the Thirteenth Constitutional Amendment, adopted on 6 December, 1865, formally abolished slavery and involuntary servitude nationwide. Meanwhile, the dumbing down of America progresses apace. Delaware schoolchildren, for example, are no longer “expected to recall any specific event or person in history”¹².

Perhaps to counter this closing of the American mind, in 2004, at the height of one of the lowest periods in American political history, Philip Roth published the most political and most historical novel in his career. Make no mistake, this is the same Roth who, with Nixon as the Veep in the White House, made waves with his remark that American fiction lost the fight against reality which had superseded all flights of satirical imagination. In this he was memorably echoed by Tom Lehrer who a generation ago remarked that Nixon — this time as the President — killed political satire.

No matter. *The Plot Against America* would be that rare bird, a political novel about politics, or if you like, a great American political fiction.

III

In *Ghost Writer* (1979) Roth created a middle-aged Jewish novelist who lives in rural New England, teaches liberal arts and, out of scorn for the public world, devotes his time and energies to art. His name: E.I. Lonoff. Ever eager to fall on the sword of biographical fallacy, many critics read it as a straightforward portrait of Bernard Malamud, the

¹¹ See Kessler.

¹² *The Economist* (2011).

writer's longtime friend. In contrast to the fictional Lonoff, however, his real-life model had scarcely scorned the public world.

"Every man must be political", avowed Malamud in September 1966¹³. A month later, as more troops were again dispatched to Vietnam in a foretoken of Bush II's and Obama's military surges in Asia, he echoed Aristotle in another interview: "there's no such thing as an unpolitical man". In the context Roth's admission that there is as much of him as of Malamud in the fictive Lonoff should give a pause to the critics who would divorce either writer from the political context in which they live and write.

Years earlier, asked about the political effect of his satire *Our Gang* (1971) in which Nixon runs against Satan for the leadership of hell, Roth took refuge in the myth of an artist paring his fingernails, demurring that satire cannot be judged in terms of politics. But even as he took away with one hand, he gave with the other. *Our Gang* "has teeth and claws", he boasted to *Newsweek*, "and not everybody likes that"¹⁴. From that he went straight back to maintaining that satire is a literary, not a political act, no matter how reformist the passion of the author.

In 1989 Tom Wolfe took Roth to task for retreating from public issues into the introspective world of fiction. No one knows how deeply Roth felt the sting, but over the next decade-and-a-half he released a series of socially and politically engag   novels, culminating in 2004 with *The Plot Against America*. Yet, in a 1971 interview entitled "On Satirizing Presidents", he played the devil's advocate to Alan Lelchuk:

Political satire isn't writing that lasts. Though satire, by and large, deals with enduring social and political problems, its comic appeal lies in the use made of the situation of the moment... Subtleties of wit and malice are wholly lost over the years, and we're left to enjoy the broadest, least timebound aspects of the work, and to hunt through the footnotes in order to make connections and draw inferences that are the teeth and claws of this sort of writing.

¹³ In Lasher, 20; next quote in Lasher 22.

¹⁴ Searles, 41; see also Searles, 51.

Then, to make sure no one made the political connection between fact and fiction, he appended sixty pages of straight history, politics, and biography to *The Plot Against America*. Clearly Roth's now-you-see-it-now-you-don't leaves a prominent excluded middle. Agitprop is not art, but from this it does not follow that 'political art' is a contradiction in terms. Literature begins where partisan proselytizing stops not because it is bereft of reformist passion but because it asks to be judged by more than a single-minded or simple-minded set of criteria¹⁵.

To read Roth with a view to what he intimates about the psychology and pathology of American politics is not to take anything away from his art. Slice his novels any way you like, but at the core of many of them simmers something that might mistaken for reformist passion. That is why to separate *Our Gang* from the Nixon of Vietnam and Watergate, *Operation Shylock* from the strangulation of Palestine, or *The Plot Against America* from the Pinocchio presidency of George W. Bush would be to emasculate his art no less than if you took every word as biographical gospel.

If Roth really affirmed nothing when he went after the social or political sacred cows of our times, then something else would have to explain the fiery opprobria that dogged his career. If fiction writers are free to exercise their poetic licence to kill without minding who gets in the way of the fictive bullets, something else would have to explain Bill Kauffman's online review of *The Plot Against America* as "a repellent novel, bigoted and libellous of the dead, dripping with hatred of rural America, of Catholics, of any Middle American who has ever dared stand against the war machine".

Seamlessly, the novel weaves in two plotlines. The first follows a Roth family sucked into the vortex of counter-historical events unfolding between June 1940 and October 1942 (punctuated by sporadic flash-forwards). The other tracks wartime America as it succumbs to a fascist makeover — and loves every minute of it. Both stories come together in the innocent-eye narration by a seven-year old Phillie Roth, allowing the artist to refract rather than reflect the United States between 2000 and 2004 in all its consequences: tragic, comic, and grotesque.

¹⁵ See Swirski, *From Lowbrow to Nobrow*, and *Ars Americana, Ars Politica*.

Picture yourself in the Weequahic neighbourhood in Newark where streets are named after the victorious naval commanders of the Cuban war, the same that changed the erstwhile republic into a colonial empire. It is 1940 and the country goes gaga over Charles Lindbergh, Republican candidate for president and proud recipient of the Service Cross of the German Eagle conferred on him by Hitler for services to the Reich. Frenzied rhetoric chokes the national media as Lindbergh wins the popular and the electoral vote, relegating FDR to the trashbin of alternate history.

Politically, nothing else takes place than a democratic and constitutional change of government. Emotionally, like in the months after 9/11 when America executed a sharp turn to the right, all hell breaks loose.

Abroad, Hitler overruns Europe and hammers Russia, while Japan makes conquistadorial strides in Asia and the Pacific. Meanwhile Lindbergh goes to any length to fulfil his promise to stay out of “the Jewish war” — and then some, throwing a White House ball to a Nazi foreign minister. Meanwhile, the Republican administration turns to social engineering. The new Office of American Absorption begins to ‘integrate’ Jews by means of programs like Just Folks that send Jewish teenagers to the Midwest to experience life in America’s heartland.

The allusions to the Third Reich’s programs of Aryanization, starting with their obsession with countryside and its *Volk*, are unmistakable. So are echoes of *Lebensborn*, a program set up by Himmler’s SS to — among others — administer relocation programmes for children. More social engineering comes in the form of Homesteader ’42, a program that relocates Jewish families from Weequahic and other New England neighbourhoods to farming and smalltown communities in the Midwest. Meanwhile, in a reverse diaspora, the Good Neighbor project resettles gentiles in the apartments vacated by the dispersed Jews.

But dark as they are, even darker shadows are cast by the ghosts of the Republican administration under Bush II, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Colin Powell, John Ashcroft, George Tenet, and Condoleezza Rice. In the novel it is Walter Winchell, gossip columnist extraordinaire, who sloganeers against the Republican rasis and swastinkers in the White House. With hyperbolic spinsanity choking

the airwaves and voices of reason drowning in mob chants, in no time he finds himself under attack (the historical Winchell turned into a McCarthyite in the 1950s).

Nerves fray, emotionally exhausted people stagger from one false alarm to another, while the right-wing administration stokes the unrest for its own agenda. Fears reach hysterical pitch and some Jewish families begin to sneak across the border to the land of the free — Canada. Eventually, fanned by propaganda and disinformation, the tensions boil over. Riots erupt all over the country. Amid the bombing of synagogues and looting of Jewish stores, a hundred and twenty two Jews are murdered during the American *Kristallnacht*.

The novel approximates the breathless, scattershot, documentary feel of its times by chopping the penultimate chapter into a montage of newsreel sections. Bad days. War. Rotting corpses. Anti-war slogans. Country split down the middle. Riots in Boston, Detroit, Louisville, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Youngstown, Akron, St. Louis, Buffalo, Peoria, Scranton, Syracuse. Witch hunts of individuals who stand up to the regime. Police everywhere. Winchell assassinated. Marches, rallies, demagoguery. Accusations of fascism. Counter-accusations of war mongering.

Then, a bombshell: the president's plane vanishes during one of his iconic solo flights. "Where is *Lind-bergh*?" becomes a rallying slogan for the dissenters, even as a power-hungry Republican cabal sends the army and the National Guard into the streets in the name of law and order. Commanded by the vice president, the plotters declare the country to be in peril, impose martial law and a nationwide curfew, and deploy tanks and infantry in 'Jew York'. Borders are sealed among an orgy of arrests of prominent statesmen and public figures, even as rumours of more secret detentions fuel mass hysteria.

And then, as suddenly as it started, it's all over. In an endgame as sly as provocative, America gets back on its feet. Led by Lindbergh's wife, who escapes detention from a mental hospital, the political and emotional assault on the nation is exposed for what it is. America shakes off its infatuation with fascism, the usurpers are arrested, FDR returns to power, Japan torches Pearl Harbor (a year later than in reality), and history settles back onto its familiar course. All that remains is a

multitude of theories trying to make sense of what *really* happened. According to one of them, the Republican president was less than a monster than a stooge for his Veep.

Released in 2004, *The Plot Against America* went bare-knuckled after a fascist Republican presidency. It captured the spirit of the days when, conditioned with countrywide social engineering in the form of the Patriot Act — which violated sections of the Bill of Rights, i.e., the Constitution itself — dissident voices were shouted down¹⁶. When wearing a ‘Peace on Earth’ t-shirt in public got you arrested and jailed. When peace-marchers on Washington under the banner of ‘One Nation Under Surveillance’ were pooh-poohed by Rumsfeld that they “should have more trust in the government”.

Against this political canvas, Roth uses some of his tenderest brushstrokes to bring to life the victims of the plot against America. The Roths, their cousins, and neighbours do not so much pick their way by the compass of reason as by gut instinct and feeling. The family trip to Washington, D.C., during which Herman Roth staggers from red fury to blanched shock to black fear as he rages against the regime, is only the beginning. In another emotional climax, young Alvin runs off to fight Hitler, only to return home without a leg. From then on, foreboding and tears take up permanent residence in the Roth house.

If a novelist does not persuade by what he is trying to say but by a sense of fictional authenticity, then Roth is very persuasive, indeed. Look no further than his Lindbergh. Like Picasso’s single-line sketch of a dachshund, he is drawn with the economy that allows all Americans to project their hopes and fears onto him — just like they do with Obama. Such is Roth’s narrative power that the president looms like one of Albert Speer’s architectural monuments: at once larger-than-life and a proof that if the lie is big enough, it will be believed. He is, quite simply, a stand-in for another war-fixated Republican president.

Ironically, as Bush was pursuing his second war in Asia, Roth created a White House dead set against sending America to fight. The contrast could not be harsher. Historically, the WWII is regarded as a good war which the U.S. fought in defense of democracy, if not the world itself.

¹⁶ For “t-shirt”, see McConnell; Rumsfeld quote in Scott-Tyson.

The neo-colonial grab of Iraqi oil, on the other hand, was shot through with lies that conned Americans reeling from the emotional agitation of 9/11 into believing that it had something to do with retributive justice — or, later on, nation building. How much the country was taken for a ride is divulged by George W. Bush himself:

I don't think our troops ought to be used for what's called nation building. I think our troops ought to be used to fight and win war. I think our troops ought to be used to help overthrow a dictator when it's in our best interests. But in this case, it was a nation-building exercise... And it was not very successful.¹⁷

Bush's attack on nation building in Haiti took place less than three years before his about-face about nation building in Iraq. Ask yourself: why are we raping foreign countries buried in the deserts and mountains of Asia Minor whose people did us nothing wrong and pose no credible threat to the United States? Why are we bombing the bejesus out of their civilians, fuelling hatred for the invaders?

The answer is simple. The U.S. economy and politics are addicted to war. Every year *half* of the discretionary budget goes to war and only 0.0006 percent to peacekeeping ops¹⁸. It cost about a cool million a year to keep a soldier in Iraq. And to paraphrase the words of one of Nixon's henchmen, with the military economy holding the United States by the balls, the country's minds and hearts follow. This is why American soldiers are still pacifying Afghanistan under Obama. This is why planning for the military occupation of Iraq began years before Bush II's accession to power. This is why planning for the plot against America began before Lindbergh.

IV

From a schoolboard superintendent to the president of the United States, every candidate for office promises a clean sweep. As far as campaign promises go, few could make it more apparent that we

¹⁷ Bush [2000].

¹⁸ US Department of Defense, "FY 2003".

chronically elect the worst possible aspirant. After all, with so many sweepers shaking their brooms at the Augean stables, by now there should be nothing left to sweep. Instead, every time it is more of the same, from pork-barrel earmarks to political simony. The former Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich, who solicited bids for Obama's vacant Senate seat, made only one mistake: he got caught.

But, against reason, we want to believe. That's why in November 2008 we succumbed to a mass delusion by sending a 47-year old senator from Illinois to the White House. Cynics are by and large failed romantics, and many saw in him if not a saviour, then at least a redeemer. Democratic candidate, then presidential candidate, then president-elect promised to act swiftly and boldly. No dithering, no pandering to lobbyists. Just do the right thing and do it now. After hearing the same spiel from every would-be president since the beginning of the American presidency, voters took him at his word.

Politicians will promise anything to get people to get into bed with them, and campaigns are bad harbingers of things to come. Obama the president is not Obama the stumping firebrand. He promised to be swift: now he has fallen behind with everything, starting with closing Guantanamo. He promised change. Now he copycats Dubya by increasing military budgets, fighting wars in Asia, muzzling the release of photos of dead soldiers' coffins, short-changing education, and bailing out Big Banks and Big Businesses with little people's money. No wonder that in November 2010 his party got slapped (and loud) with a midterm reality check.

Every national myth, in fact, marks a triumph of emotion over reason. Myth, if you like, is emotional credit that can be spent when the political account dips into the red. After all, people want to believe and, in that sense, they want to be deceived. As with any religion, voluntary indoctrination is easy. All it takes is emotionally stirring incantations from the head priest, some symbolic pageantry, and a lot of faith. Supported by iconography, such as physical elevation or the swearing of the oath of allegiance, they redirect kinship affiliation onto the non-genetic political entity.

The American presidency is such a secular religion, eliciting reverence for what is, after all, just a non-tenured administration job.

The vestal colouration of the White House enhances the imagery of the head priest dwelling in a sacred temple. Relics of its past occupants, from Lincoln's canopy bed to Hayes's *Resolute* desk, consecrate the hallowed grounds. State functions are liturgical communions of the power emanating from the Oval Office. Rounding up the picture, Washington's house — piously visited by the Roths in *The Plot Against America* — is a shrine to the American Adam, the father of the nation.

Meanwhile, once inside the White House, every First Lady becomes Eve *immaculata*. Roth taps into this prelapsarian imagery when, leading the resistance to the coup, Lindberg's wife is revered as "Our Lady of the White House" (319). Indeed, while lay-religious symbolism permeates every state address that directs God to bless America, the theological presidency of Bush the Younger kicked it into overdrive. Just recall the iconic overtones of Bush's descent from on high onto the deck of the *Abraham Lincoln* to deliver his 'Mission Accomplished' sermon to the saluting disciples, before rising up to heaven again.

Conversely, when the all-too-human and all-too-fallible occupants of the temple strip it of its gloss, the shock among the believers belies the fact that, far from saviours, America's leaders are only its top bureaucrats. And yet there is this shibboleth, chimes in Roth, "respect for the office of the Presidency — as though there were no distinction between the man who holds and degrades the office and the office itself"¹⁹. To be sure, many presidents suffer from acute shortage of moral fibre, not to mention intelligence, but that's not how Camelot is spun. From Washington on, every POTUS is an Arthur, every policy wonk a Galahad.

Able as a commander of the revolutionary militia, as a president, however, Washington was a political dupe, unable to grasp that the legislative floor was far more treacherous than any battleground. In the role that required the vigilance of an East German Berlin Wall sentry, he was slipshod and gullible. Still, the myth trumps historical fact. Washington continues to be revered as one of the greatest presidents of the United States, with every greenback reinforcing the lay faith by overlaying the trust in the father of the nation with the trust in the

¹⁹ In Searles, 50.

divine father (in a country that constitutionally separates the State and the Church).

Trust — or if you like, faith — is indeed the key. Insofar as securing votes is the lifeline of any politician, they make promises right and left as long as there is a chance they will be believed. But stump promises can be a double edged sword. There is always the risk they might backfire if they are seen to have been unkept. Most presidential campaign promises have, in fact, been broken. When Wilson vowed to keep America out of the war in Europe, few believed him even though the Germans had not yet torpedoed the *Lusitania*. When FDR pledged in the 1941 inaugural that this country was not going to war, few believed him even though Nagumo had not yet sneaked up on Pearl Harbor.

Still, when their survival instincts are primed by war, Americans tend to rally behind their leaders instead of taking them to task for breach of trust. From time to time they do it even in times of peace. LBJ pledged to eliminate poverty, even though no nation in history has succeeded in doing so. Reagan promised to eliminate illicit drugs. His successor vowed to engineer America into a kinder and gentler nation. Never meant to be kept, all these covenants had, however, a certain emotional decorum. They were presidential — not to say utopian — in ambition.

In this they differed from those that could have been kept, but weren't. In 1968 Nixon promised everything to everybody, beginning with ending the Vietnam war with all possible dispatch. He lied. Bush I tethered his electoral campaign to the promise of no new taxes. Once in office, he reneged on his word to tackle deficits run up, among others, by the first war in Iraq.

Such flagrant nose-thumbing at the constituents is not, however, as widespread as might seem. Cartoonists may draw politicians as slimeballs, but when politicians lie they rarely leave tracks. Much of the time they operate in the comfort zone between truth and falsehood, praying on the unwary with emotion and hyperbole.

The textbook example comes from Bush's 2001 tax relief plan. Mindful not to repeat his father's error, once in office Dubya got the Republican Congress to whittle the top income tax rate down to 35 percent (after World War II it stood at 90 percent). When the opposition contested that it mainly benefited the rich, Bush countered that the

bottom of the economic ladder would receive the biggest savings: “Six million families, one out of every five families with children, will no longer pay federal income taxes at all.”²⁰

So, here is how you cheat on taxes president-style by wringing every drop out of emotionally charged terms such as family and children. Take a ‘nuclear’ low-income American family of four, with income of twenty six grand a year. Under Bush’s plan, they received a monster one-hundred-percent reduction in taxes. But in real terms they netted all of... \$20. That’s right: twenty bucks, or the value of their entire annual income tax. The president’s promise of relieving six million families with children from paying up was a federal three-card Monte.

In fact, if you rake up all the money from Bush’s tax-relief plan into one big pile, the top one percent of the richest folks in the United States pocketed almost *half* of the total. The top twenty percent pocketed almost three-quarters. On the other hand, the bottom 40 percent received only a shade over four percent of that pile. The poorest 20 percent — supposedly the category that benefitted the most — received less than one percent of the total. Twelve million lowest-income families saw no benefits whatsoever because they had zero income-tax liability²¹.

Rhetorical gambits can conjure up different emotions even when they refer to one and the same thing. Compare Obama and McCain’s tax credits from their 2008 campaign trail. Tax credits differ from tax cuts in that they are measured in absolute (dollar) terms — which means that you can qualify even if you didn’t pay any tax at all. Obama tabled a number of refundable tax credits to low- and middle-income workers, for example \$500 for those making less than seventy-five thousand a year. Immediately, the Republicans tagged it as ‘welfare’ since some Americans who paid no taxes would still qualify.

The thing is, McCain also proposed a refundable tax credit of up to \$2,500 for individuals, or up to \$5,000 for families, as part of his health care plan. Only instead of smearing his own proposal as ‘welfare’, he extolled it as tax ‘reform’. Different terms, tagging essentially the same initiative, carried different emotional connotations

²⁰ Bush, “Remarks.”

²¹ Corn, 79-92.

for the public. For most taxpayers, ‘reform’ comes bundled up with the eutopian subtexts of improvement and progress. ‘Welfare’, on the other hand, is stereotyped as the mother of social parasitism and the child of special interests.

Emotion-laden stereotypes sustain many political myths, including knee-jerk charges that liberal policies punish hardworking Joes by sponsoring welfare. In 2008 the issue shot to nationwide eminence during the third McCain-Obama debate, acquiring emotional resonance from the presence of Samuel Wurzelbacher, aka Joe the Plumber. Remember him? A few days earlier, ‘Joe’ pooh-poohed Obama’s economic plan during a rally in Ohio. Now, cameras rolling, McCain ripped Obama for wrecking Joe and other regular guys who “all of these years, worked 10, 12 hours a day” to buy a small business in their bid “to realize the American Dream”²².

If only. The facts in the case — which caused no end of embarrassment to McCain, who implicitly staked his credibility on this rhetorical salvo — flipped the script. Not only did ‘Joe’ turn out not to even have a plumbing licence, but he could not have earned the capital he implied to have earned to open a plumbing business. Spinning this American political fiction, no matter how at odds with fact, did not hurt Wurzelbacher in the least. Capitalizing on his notoriety, in 2012 he became a Republican candidate for Congress from Ohio (eking out the nomination with 51 percent of the vote despite outspending his rival six to one).

If the first casualty of war is truth, this is as true of a war of words as of any other. *The Plot Against America* assembles a masterful picture of propaganda wars in which emotional orators grab you by the lapels and pull you so close that your nose is flattened against their rhetoric. It is natural that writers should be attuned to the ways words are forged into weapons, and Roth’s novel is replete with examples of verbal sniping and hyperbolic overkill. With Winchell on the far left, the Bundists on the far right, and America caught in the crossfire, everyone has a slogan to grind.

The Bundists sport “Keep America Out of the Jewish War” buttons and “Wake up America—Smash Jewish Communists!” banners

²² CBCNews, online.

(176). Winchell rants “Fascism! Fascism!” against the Republican government’s “Hitlerite plot against America” (260). In turn, the *Detroit Times* smears him as the “Jewish demagogue whose aim from the outset had been to incite the rage of patriotic Americans with his treasonous rabble-rousing” (266). On the other end of the spectrum, *PM*, the left-wing tabloid religiously read by Herman Roth, flaunts its own slogan: “*PM* is against people who push other people around” (18).

In the wake of the Hawaii Understanding — whereby Lindbergh joins the German-Japanese axis of evil in all but name — joyful Americans take to the streets, chanting “No war, no young men fighting and dying ever again!” (55). Lindbergh’s own catchphrase, hammered no less than fifteen times in his State of the Union, proclaims: “An independent destiny for America” (84). Earlier on, he secures his election with an even catchier slogan: “Vote for Lindbergh or vote for war” (31). FDR pulls all rhetorical stops by haranguing: “The only thing we have to fear... is the obsequious yielding to his Nazi friends by Charles A. Lindbergh” (178).

This inundation with slogans, buzzwords, catchphrases, and taglines is all too familiar to us, victims of extreme journalism. The internet, television, and newspapers fight for the American public’s scant time and attention, gone are the old-fangled notions of objective stenography of events. Today’s news media inundate voters with a googolplex of ever-more flashy headlines and story breaks in an attempt to crowd one another out of the already saturated market. Jamming people’s radar with inflationary quantities of facts and factoids, political spin is changing not just the rules of the game but the game itself.

V

When *The Plot Against America* landed in bookstores across the country on the eve of the 2004 election, it must have been hard for readers to refrain from pinching themselves — Roth’s half-hearted disclaimers about reading it as a *roman à clef* notwithstanding.

How could readers not think of the Patriot Act when stung by Winchell’s rants at the suppression of the Bill of Rights? How could they not think of phony WMDs and America’s illegal wars when confronted with Herman Roth’s plaints: “How can this be happening in America?

How can people like these be in charge of our country?” (196). How could Roth think that his readers would not think of Bush II when he asked them: “How long will Americans remain asleep while their cherished Constitution is torn to shreds by the fascist fifth column of the Republican right marching under the sign of the cross and the flag?” (230).

The simple answer is — he couldn’t. That’s why it is not a coincidence that Lindbergh’s approval ratings of 80-90 percent are a perfect match of Bush’s in the wake of 9/11 and the war on Afghanistan. That’s why the war-mongers insinuate a ridiculous threat of a WMD attack by... Canada. That’s why the Republicans spinners assure the public that the president — the plain speaking, aviator-attired president — is not a dictator but a democratically elected leader. Add the false alerts, the diversions, and the hysteria, and it is clear that under no circumstances should any of this be taken to bear any resemblance to real-life events or persons, dead or alive.

Examples of fictions changing real lives are, of course, as many as one cares to count, from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, to Osip Mandelstam’s irreverent verse about Stalin which got him sent to death in the Gulag, to the three British men convicted in 2008 for conspiring to kill a publisher of a (very mediocre) novel about a child-bride of the Prophet Mohamed. But nothing can beat the Pentagon requesting soldiers on active duty, vets, and — hard to believe as it sounds — officials at the Defense Department and other politicians watch political fiction in the hope of changing the mindset of those involved in Afghanistan.

In 2009, London theatres put on a marathon of a twelve plays, called *The Great Game: Afghanistan*, all dealing with the history of Western intervention and involvement in the country. In February 2011, at the Pentagon’s request the entire series of these political fictions were staged in Washington, D.C., to teach something to the American military and political rank and file about the country they have been occupying longer than the Russians had in the 1980s.

“There is an assumption that the arts and our men and women in the uniform are from different planets. It’s not the case”, said the Defense Department spokesman²³.

²³ *The Economist* 19 Feb. (2011): 79.

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