

DANIEL ROSS GOODMAN | DONALD TRUMP'S PLOT AGAINST AMERICA - AND THE ONE WRITER WHO SAW IT COMING | ESSAY

A famous, wealthy, bigoted, isolationist with no previous governmental experience receives the Republican Party nomination for president of the United States. The Democratic candidate he is running against is a long-time member of the United States political establishment—a candidate whose surname signifies American political royalty—who has lived in the White House for eight years, has served as an elected official of one of the country's most populous states (New York), and whose center-left pragmatism has received the scorn of the right for being too progressive and the criticism of the left for being too centrist. The Democrats at first do not take their opponent seriously; they are thankful that their opponent is an amateurish showman rather than a more established senator, governor, or savvy lawyer.

Sound familiar so far? This is not a description of the 2016 presidential election—although it could be. It is a description of the plot of Philip Roth's terrifying 2004 novel *The Plot Against America*, an alternate history wherein Franklin Delano Roosevelt loses the 1940 presidential election to the celebrity aviator—and Nazi Germany sympathizer—Charles A. Lindbergh.

When we think of literature that has predicted the future, science fiction, not literary fiction, is typically the genre that comes to mind. Jules Verne (*20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*) predicted the submarine, Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*) predicted depression-sapping drugs, genetic engineering, and the rise of the leisure-oriented consumer society, Ray Bradbury (*Fahrenheit 451*) predicted ubiquitous flat-screen televisions and non-stop mindless entertainment on demand, and George Orwell (1984) predicted the modern surveillance state. But the most frightening literary prediction of all—an unintentional prediction which is being distressingly realized thus far in this year's presidential election—is Philip Roth's unintentional prediction of a wealthy, famous, bigoted, isolationist candidate capturing the Republican nomination and sending shockwaves throughout the hearts and minds of all those who sincerely believe that all persons are created equal.

Just as this year's Democrats were initially happy that they did not have to run against a governor with the clout and experience of Jeb Bush or a prosecutor as aggressive as Ted Cruz or a young up-and-coming politician as smooth and handsome as Marco Rubio, in Roth's chilling novel, Roosevelt and the Democrats are grateful that they do not have to run against "a senator of the stature of Taft or a prosecutor as aggressive as Dewey or a big-time lawyer as smooth and handsome as Willkie." They don't take Lindbergh seriously, belittling his campaign as an opportunistic stunt. And when the political novice Lindbergh is out on the stump, his refusal to listen to advisors other than himself, his lack of strategic thinking—criticisms that have also been leveled against Trump—and other political gaffes have the Democrats imagining an easy victory. But Roth's novel teaches us that both the 1940 and 2016 Democrats should have preferred the devil they knew—and that the devil they didn't know should have been taken very seriously indeed.

Lindbergh, like Trump, wants to disengage America from the world—his slogan, "an independent

destiny for American," has a similar ring to Trump's "make America great again"—rails against the press, government, and mainstream media, and spouts venomous hatred against religious and ethnic minorities. Lindbergh's target is the Jews; Trump's animosity is directed against Mexicans and Muslims. Lindbergh flies to his campaign stops in his *Spirit of St. Louis*; Trump jets to his rallies in his "Trump Force One." Lindbergh reaches a suspicious mutual "Understanding" pact with Adolf Hitler; Trump cozies up with a devious twenty-first century European strongman with possible imperial ambitions of his own, Vladimir Putin.

Roth's Lindbergh speaks proudly of the "inheritance of European blood," and warns against "dilution by foreign races" and "the infiltration of inferior blood." The most terrifying aspect of Lindbergh's sentiments—like Trump's insidious racism—is that they were held by a larger portion of Americans than tolerant people who thought their country had moved on from such open bigotry "could ever imagine to" have been "flourishing" in this country. Similar to Trump's denouncing of Latinos and Muslims, Lindbergh condemns Jews as "other peoples" who are brining about America's ruin.

Trump did not mention Muslims or Latinos in his nomination speech in Cleveland, leading some to think that he has either forgotten about his hate-provoking comments, or has started to pivot to the general election, wanting to paint himself as a more tolerant, electable candidate. But Roth warns us that just because Trump did not mention the groups he has been targeting throughout the primary season is no reason to think that Trump has changed his mind about the groups he believes are holding America back from being "great again." In Roth's novel, candidate Lindbergh also did not mention Jews in his convention speech, causing some Jews to think that maybe Lindbergh "had changed his mind." But that was not the case, and the few watchdog journalists seeking to expose Lindbergh's intolerance aren't enough to prevent a groundswell of like-minded support from carrying him to the presidency. Michael Moore has predicted that Trump will win the election; in *The Plot Against America*, Philip's brother Sandy predicts that Lindbergh will become president. Sandy wasn't taken seriously; can we afford to make the same mistake with Trump?

The Talmud says that after the destruction of the Temple, prophecy was taken from the prophets and given to the fools; it seems that recently, though, prophecy has been taken from the fools and given to the writers. Roth's novel did not "prophesize" about the past, but in an eerie, frightening way, his alternate history has become a prophecy for an alternate future—a future which we still have a chance at preventing. If we do not challenge Lindbergh's [ideological] successor at every opportunity, and if we are not vigilant in exercising our right to vote this November, we may live to see the day when it is said that those who have not read Mr. Roth's alternative history have become doomed to repeat it—not in fiction, but in fact.