

# The concluding episodes of *The Plot Against America*: In 1940, an America gone fascist

David Walsh  
23 April 2020

The final part of HBO's six-episode adaptation of Philip Roth's 2004 novel *The Plot Against America* aired April 20. The miniseries was created and written by David Simon and Ed Burns, and directed by Minkie Spiro (Episodes 1-3) and Thomas Schlamme (Episodes 4-6).

The novel and its television adaptation imagine an alternate history in which aviation hero and Hitler admirer Charles A. Lindbergh (1902-74) becomes the Republican Party's candidate for president in 1940 and, running on a staunchly antiwar platform and on the basis of his personal popularity, wins the general election against two-term incumbent Democrat, Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The book's narrator is a character named Philip Roth, who, like the novelist (who died in 2018), was seven in 1940 and lived in the predominantly Jewish Weequahic neighborhood of Newark, New Jersey with his father, Herman, an insurance agent, and his mother, Bess. (In the HBO series, the family's name has been changed to Levin.)

The Simon-Burns series has been seriously and intelligently written and performed, and while it occasionally falls below the level of the novel from a psychological or historical point of view, at other moments it actually improves on Roth's work.

At the end of the series, the viewer may be forgiven if he or she holds on to quite contradictory opinions and feelings, sentiments that may have flowed in a positive direction at a given instant and in a more negative one only moments later.

There is unsettling, genuine social truth here in the dark and ominous turn by the American state under Lindbergh and his accomplices (including the auto mogul and rabid anti-Semite Henry Ford as Secretary of the Interior) toward authoritarianism and open mass repression. In fact, it can happen here!

The creators effectively portray the anxiety and desperation of the lower middle class Levins, along with their relatives and neighbors, as they attempt to cope with an increasingly menacing political and existential situation. There are genuinely moving and convincing passages. The series' creators clearly have their eye on the present circumstances and the wild right-wing rampages of the Trump administration.

On the other hand, and here the writers and directors have directly inherited their problems from Roth and his novel, the broader social and historical dynamics are poorly represented. The series, although it hints at certain social and economic developments of the era, tends to view fascism, in America and elsewhere, as merely the flaring up of age-old hatreds and prejudices, specifically against the Jews.

Complementing this conception is a highly selective view of America in the late 1930s and 1940s. Only a handful of years from the great sit-down strikes and other immense class battles of the 1930s, *The Plot Against America* pictures a nation with the almost godlike Roosevelt and his supporters, among the more prominent gossip columnist Walter Winchell and New York's Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, at one extreme, and the fascist Lindbergh, supported or tolerated apparently by the majority of "ordinary Americans," in the words of the novel, "tens of thousands of

them, maybe millions of them," who hated Jews, at the other. Absent is the mass labor movement, the newly emerged industrial unions, in particular, the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, the Trotskyists, left-wing artists and writers and the rest of the intellectual and ideological inhabitants of the time.

We wrote an initial piece on the series in late March that looked at Parts 1 and 2. In Parts 3 through 6 the drama of the Levins and the rest of America continues and reaches a climax.

The new Lindbergh administration, after signing a neutrality pact with the Nazi regime in Germany, initiates various programs aimed at absorbing and dissolving America's Jews into the general population. The teenage Sandy Levin (Caleb Malis), encouraged by his aunt Evelyn (Winona Ryder) and partly in rebellion against his father, Herman (Morgan Spector), wants to take part in the program by spending time on a farm in Kentucky. Initially, Herman opposes Sandy's participation.

The Levins as a family take a long-planned trip to Washington, DC, where they encounter both increasingly outspoken anti-Semitism and elementary decency.

The pompous, overbearing Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf (John Turturro), with whom Evelyn—the unmarried sister of Bess Levin (Zoe Kazan)—has developed a personal relationship, is given considerable authority as an official in and the "Jewish face" of the ultraright administration in Washington and defends its actions with self-interested sophistry.

Alvin Levin (played by the Irish-born Anthony Boyle), Herman Levin's nephew and an orphan, joins up with the Canadian military to fight Hitler, but loses a leg during a commando operation. He returns home, broken and despondent. Because he took up arms against Germany, now an ally of the US, Alvin comes under the watchful, sinister eye of the FBI, who considers him something of a "Communist" and manages to have him fired from his job. Portrayed largely as a wastrel in Roth's novel, Alvin, in the Simon and Burns' version of things, although drawn toward a life of small-time gangsterism, will later come to life and participate in the resistance to Lindbergh.

One of the central threads in Episode 4 involves the eager willingness of Bengelsdorf and Evelyn to attend a state dinner at the Lindbergh White House in honor of German Foreign Minister and leading Nazi, Joachim von Ribbentrop (Orest Ludwig). Herman and Bess Levin are horrified at the very thought, but Sandy, for whom his aunt has also secured an invitation, is adamant about attending. When his parents withhold permission, Sandy calls them "ghetto Jews" and denounces his father as "worse than Hitler."

Herman and other Jewish employees at Metropolitan Life Insurance are ordered to relocate to the American "heartland" as part of the expansion of one of Rabbi Bengelsdorf's assimilation programs. Rather than move his family, Herman quits his position and goes to work for his brother Monty (David Krumholtz), a successful and cynical fruit merchant. In an earlier exchange, Herman had accused his brother and other Jewish businessmen of accommodating themselves to Lindbergh because, at least

for the moment, business is good and profits are rising. As David Simon notes pointedly in the accompanying podcast, “It’s amazing what the Dow [the stock market index] will do to somebody’s conscience.”

Bengelsdorf and Evelyn wed in opulent fashion, without the Levins in attendance. Bizarrely, Walter Winchell (Billy Carter), a vociferous and scathing critic of Lindbergh, announces his plan to run for president. Herman attends one of Winchell’s rallies, which is attacked by fascist thugs. When he returns home bloodied, Bess threatens to leave him and take the children to Canada if he continues his public political opposition.

Winchell’s assassination in Louisville, by fascist forces, sets off rioting and anti-Jewish pogroms in a number of cities. A former neighbor of the Levins, Mrs. Wishnow (Kristen Sieh), who had been forcibly resettled in Kentucky, is attacked and murdered by the Ku Klux Klan. Herman and Sandy set off to bring her dazed and devastated young son Seldon (Jacob Laval) home to Newark.

Popular opposition to Lindbergh begins to mobilize itself, given a voice by Mayor La Guardia. Meanwhile, the president’s plane is missing, and Vice President Burton Wheeler assumes authority and imposes martial law. Alvin joins an underground resistance unit. Rabbi Bengelsdorf is arrested as a “Jewish Rasputin” (in Henry Ford’s phrase) and Evelyn fears she may be next. Bess refuses to shelter her, “I will always love you, but I will never forgive you.”

Mysteriously, the First Lady, Anne Morrow Lindbergh (Caroline Kaplan), delivers a nationwide address calling for an end to the attacks on Jews and an emergency presidential election. Roosevelt campaigns for another term, and on election night, the Levins anxiously await the outcome ...

As noted, there are genuinely moving and forceful sequences in this adaptation of *The Plot Against America*. Both Herman and Bess Levin come across as caring and admirable human beings, capable of great selflessness. Bess’s effort over the telephone to calm Seldon, distraught by his mother’s disappearance, is one of her finest moments. Herman is hard-working and conscientious, perpetually and legitimately angry, if dangerously naïve about the permanence and stability of America’s democratic institutions.

Of Herman, Roth writes admiringly, “it was enough for him to make something (rather than everything) of himself and to do so without wrecking the lives around him. My father was born to contend but also to protect, and to inflict damage on an enemy didn’t make his spirits soar as it did his older brother’s (not to mention all the rest of the brutal entrepreneurial *machers* [powerful, influential people]).”

The portraits of Rabbi Bengelsdorf and Evelyn are particularly acute and pertinent. Bengelsdorf, given to pontificating, according to Roth, about “‘the Americanization of Americans’ [as] the best means to preserve our democracy against ‘Bolshevism, radicalism, and anarchism,’” is fatally attracted to fame and power. Capable of rationalizing any crime, the rabbi looks down on Newark’s Jewish “*hoi polloi*” and remains oblivious until the end to the mass suffering the Lindbergh administration’s policies produce. Evelyn, insecure, unstable, self-centered and, finally, pitiful, is a picture of petty-bourgeois aspiration and delusion.

*The Plot Against America* is unusual American television. Targeting official hypocrisy and reaction, profiteering and political corruption, and, more generally, many of the lies official America tells about itself, the series is designed to encourage thinking and criticism. Simon and Burns make no secret of their antipathy for the xenophobia, anti-immigrant viciousness and reactionary social policies of the Trump administration. Simon sees “obvious parallels” between the fictional election of Lindbergh and the actual coming to power of Trump.

The reason to do the series now, he explains, “is not to argue about anti-Semitism in 1940. The verdict on isolationism, and on Lindbergh and America First, is already in. No need to do the piece to reargue that. It’s allegorical to what’s happening to people with black and brown skin and

immigrants and Muslims right now. And I would hope people would see that in some respects—what Roth did with Jewish Americans applies going forward.”

Simon (*The Wire*, *Generation Kill*, *Treme*, *The Deuce*) is one of the more interesting and provocative figures working in American television at present. He and Burns, a former Baltimore policeman (who sees the cops as “defenders of the wealthy” and “choosing the side of the oligarchy”), seem committed to countering the brutalization and stupidity of so much contemporary popular culture.

Much that they do is to their credit. But there is no reason to close one’s eyes to the serious limitations of their outlook, associated with liberal and Democratic Party circles, and its consequences for their artistic work.

Simon, like many in his affluent milieu, supported Barack Obama and views Trump’s victory in 2016 as a reactionary backlash against the supposedly “progressive” Democratic president.

For example, he notes that the first time someone suggested he adapt *The Plot Against America* “was right after Obama had been inaugurated for the second time” in 2013. To Simon, the book then “just felt like an artifact, with the country moving in a more inclusive direction and we were less susceptible to fears of the other. I just didn’t see it. It didn’t feel like the political moment we were in.”

This reveals how distant Simon—like the upper middle class “left” as a whole—was from the punishing economic and social conditions facing wide layers of the population and their seething anger. There was mass revulsion against Obama and the Democratic candidate in 2016, Hillary Clinton, whose contempt for the working class was palpable. In Simon’s view, however, Trump was elected because the American people were “vulnerable to demagoguery or xenophobia” (in the writer-producer’s words).

Simon and Burns, like Roth himself, extend this misguided thinking to the more general presentation of fascism. As suggested above, the novel and the series both incline toward the view that the fascist danger flows from the innate or latent bigotry of the population. As Herman Levin asserts in the final episode, “The hate is there. It’s like dry leaves waiting on a spark.” In Roth’s book, Europe in 1940 is reduced in the author’s estimation to a place “where there was a thousand-year history of anti-Semitism deeply rooted in the common people and where Nazi rule was absolute.”

This is false and disorienting. The bourgeoisie in modern capitalist society turns toward the fascist solution under conditions of an economic and social crisis that can no longer be contained within democratic-parliamentary forms. Precisely when and where it feels most threatened by the danger of upheaval from below and, ultimately, revolution and socialism, the ruling elite strives might and main to incite every ounce of backwardness and prejudice, themselves the product of oppression, and construct a mass movement on their basis.

However, the victory of Nazism, as Leon Trotsky and the Trotskyist movement have argued and proven over the course of decades, was only made possible by a profound crisis of the German socialist movement, which squandered or betrayed numerous opportunities between 1918 and 1933 to put an end to German imperialism. It was not the inherent anti-Semitism of the “common people” in Germany that allowed Hitler to come to power, but the paralyzing, reactionary policies of the Social Democratic and Communist Parties, who proved themselves “to be politically bankrupt and utterly incapable of providing the distraught masses with a way out of the disaster created by capitalism” (David North, “A critical review of Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*”).

In Roth’s novel, the Lindbergh administration ends as abruptly and inexplicably as it arose. The aviator-president’s plane disappears, the Wheeler regime collapses and Roosevelt sweeps to power in a special election. There is next to no attempt to account for the sudden change in

popular opinion and mood. Fascism and anti-Semitism are reduced to a disease that bursts out, does its terrible damage and then subsides, to lie more or less concealed beneath the surface until the next eruption.

The HBO series is actually darker in its conclusion, again, presumably influenced by the current American situation. The results of the 1942 election remain in doubt as the series concludes. We see ballots being burned, perhaps the vote will be rigged ...

Simon and Burns do many things right here, even if they also get important matters wrong. If nothing else, their accomplishment will encourage others to go farther and pursue social and historical matters more profoundly. And that's no small thing.



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