An audio adaptation of Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*: Fascism comes to America

Carlos Delgado
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A reactionary demagogue in power. Armed militias terrorizing protesters and dissidents. Concentration camps on US soil. A wholesale assault on democratic rights. A country on the brink of civil war.

Such was the state of the United States as depicted in Sinclair Lewis's 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here*. The story presented a fictionalized version of the 1936 election in which a demagogic con man comes to power and swiftly moves to establish a fascist dictatorship.

Now, in the midst of an election marked by unprecedented political, social, and economic crisis, Berkeley Repertory Theatre (in Berkeley, California) has produced a "radio play" adaptation of the story and made it free to stream until November 8.

The adaptation suffers from a number of limitations, some of them rooted in the weaknesses of the source material. Other difficulties stem from the outlook of the artists mounting the production, which is being presented as part of a "get-out-the-vote" effort, i.e., the Democratic Party electoral campaign.

Nevertheless, Lewis's depiction of a home-grown American fascism retains a chilling effectiveness.

Doremus Jessup (David Strathairn) is a journalist and middle-class liberal living with his family in Vermont. Jessup is disturbed by the political rise of Senator Berzelius "Buzz" Windrip (David Kelly), a know-nothing populist described in the novel as "vulgar, almost illiterate, a public liar easily detected, and in his 'ideas' almost idiotic..."

Windrip challenges Roosevelt for the Democratic presidential nomination, running a campaign based on provocation, phony "man of the people" rhetoric and wild pie-in-the-sky promises. While Jessup is horrified at the idea of such a man assuming the office of the presidency, he is confident to the point of complacency that Windrip has no chance of winning. However, a wave of popular discontent ultimately propels Windrip into office.

Windrip moves quickly to establish dictatorial rule. Armed fascist militias known as the "Minutemen" are mobilized to attack protesters and arrest political opponents. Windrip declares martial law and suspends Constitutional rights. A draconian network of military courts carry out mass executions, including of Jessup's own son-in-law.

After being threatened with arrest for writing an anti-Windrip editorial, Jessup is forced to write pro-government propaganda under the supervision of his own former handyman. Meanwhile, opponents of the regime form an organization called the New Underground, which works to distribute anti-Windrip propaganda and smuggle those on the government's hit list into Canada and Mexico.

Jessup joins up with the New Underground and begins producing material for a seditious newspaper. When officials discover his operation, however, Jessup is arrested and sent to a concentration camp.

While Jessup struggles to survive his ordeal, a rebellion begins to brew within the population, propelling the country toward civil war.

In Lewis's novel, the character of Buzz Windrip was a thinly-veiled reference to Huey Long, a Democratic Party politician who served as governor of Louisiana from 1928 to 1932 and US Senator from 1932 until his assassination in 1935. A one-time supporter of Roosevelt's New Deal programs, Long eventually came to criticize them for not going far enough to relieve the economic hardship produced by the Great Depression.

Long made populist promises, far more radical than anything comparable today, but he was essentially a right-wing demagogue fearful of social upheaval. His denunciations of the wealthy elite and his populist "Share the Wealth" program earned him many powerful enemies, including officials at Standard Oil. However, Long explicitly rejected the claim that his programs were socialistic, declaring, "This plan is the only defense this country's got against communism."

While Lewis had Long's populism in mind, this

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adaptation by co-writers Tony Taccone and Bennett S. Cohen, and director Lisa Peterson clearly makes Windrip a stand-in for Donald Trump, replacing much of Lewis's "Share the Wealth" style rhetoric with demands to "bring back the good old days" and calls for the violent suppression of protests.

In drawing the connection between the present administration and the threat of American fascism, the artists are giving voice to a sentiment felt by wide layers of the population, that Trump represents something new and dangerous in American politics. In recent weeks Trump has threatened to remain in office no matter the outcome of the election, and his inflammatory remarks have inspired fascist militias to plot the assassination of Democratic governors. Trump clearly seeks to build his own "Minutemen" militias with the aim of crushing working class resistance.

Still, the political perspective of both Lewis and the artists involved in this production fall short in a number of critical ways.

First and foremost, this production is being promoted, as noted, within the context of a massive "get-out-the-vote" drive for the reactionary campaign of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. Middle-class layers in particular are clinging to the delusion that a Biden-Harris administration will represent a "return to normalcy" and that Trump's electoral defeat will put an end to the danger of fascism, even as the Democrats do everything in their power to prevent a mass working class anti-fascist movement from taking hold in the population.

The artists' inability to recognize the systemic roots of fascism weakens the adaptation. Very little of Lewis's writing on the connection between big business and the development of authoritarianism make it into this production, giving Windrip's rise something of an amorphous and socially abstract character.

For his part, Lewis was better at imagining what an American fascism might look like than understanding the class dynamics that would lead to its formation. In his telling, fascism comes to power without any serious resistance from the working class. Workers are portrayed as either indifferent to Windrip's rise or enthusiastically supportive of him.

The "socialist" workers that Jessup encounters do little more than passively comment on the fascist threat, ultimately winding up in the concentration camps themselves. In opposition to this, Jessup insists on severe individualism, "mass action by one person," against both the extremism of the left and right. While Lewis doesn't simply equate fascism with communism, his individualistic outlook and inability to even consider the role of working class leadership seriously weaken his artistic perspective.

Of course, in reality, American capitalism in the mid-1930s still had the resources to carry out limited social reforms and steal the thunder of demagogues like Long and anti-Semitic radio personality Charles Coughlin. Bourgeois liberalism was not seriously threatened at the time by Long and others. In our day, the decades-long, terminal decay of American capitalism has "vomited up" a Donald Trump.

In any event, Roosevelt's 1936 campaign ended in the biggest landslide victory in American history. Yet, Roosevelt would still go on to, as Trotsky put it, "toboggan with closed eyes toward an economic and military catastrophe" that engulfed all of world capitalism in the Second World War.

Today, American capitalism is accumulating insurmountable debt, not to finance social programs, but to prop up the banking system. The threat of fascism has emerged not from the political fringes, but from within the White House itself. Such a crisis cannot be resolved within the confines of an election, but rather through the reemergence of the working class as an independent political force.

To their credit, Taccone and Cohen take the threat of fascism seriously, as their comments in the accompanying talkback made clear. Taccone noted that the US is witnessing the "preconditions of civil war," with the growing likelihood of "violent confrontations of every kind." Cohen added, "What we are facing now is not going to go away. ... It represents the ruthless attempt to control government for the sake of a few. ... Who knows if a smarter and cagier Trump won't come along?"

In spite of the play's slant toward winning support for Biden, the two writers have felt obliged to note the deep-going crisis of American democracy. The production deserves an audience.

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