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Book Reviews

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Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*
(Houghton Mifflin, 2004)

Richard Clarke, "Ten Years Later,"
Atlantic Monthly (Jan./Feb., 2005)

Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*
(Random House Trade Paperback, 2004)

by Charles Angell

Some historical fiction likes to ask 'what if?' Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* wonders what would have happened if Charles Lindberg, friendly to Hitler and a closet anti-Semite, had been elected President of the U.S. in 1940. Richard Clarke, author of last year's *Against All Enemies*, looks ten years into the future and asks in a recent *Atlantic Monthly* article what will the U.S. look like in 2011 if the country fails to develop adequate responses and policies toward militant terrorists and jihadists. Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* shows in detail what Iran looked like when the ayatollahs succeeded in imposing their fundamentalist ideology on every citizen and most particularly on women. The three readings offer in their turn what might be termed alternative, anticipated, and actual history.

Roth employs his narrator Philip, presumably his young self, to recount the difficulties confronted by his family before and during the Lindberg presidency. His family members and relatives respond to the accelerating persecution in typical ways: resistance, denial, collaboration, even acceptance. Programs that at first seem harmless take on sinister overtones. Philip realizes that "turned wrong way round, the relentless unforeseen was what we school children studied as 'History,' harmless history, where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable. The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic." For the Jewish family and wider New Jersey community to which Philip belongs, the Lindberg presidency, made possible because of his epic flight across the Atlantic, is a disaster. He campaigns on a pledge to keep the U.S. disengaged from European affairs—no American boy will die in a foreign war—and shortly after his election signs an 'understanding' with Hitler and another shortly thereafter with the Japanese premier. Only the American Jewish community opposed the administration, in great measure because given its history, Jews could foresee all too clearly where such isolationist and nativist sentiments led. The administration creates a Just Folks program, "a volunteer work program introducing city youth to the traditional ways of heartland life," which Philip's brother Sandy joins and eagerly embraces. Philip's beautiful



and ambitious Aunt Evelyn marries Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf who heads the Lindberg administration's Office of American Absorption and serves as the administration's Jewish apologist.

The anti-Semitism intensifies. Walter Winchell, who has used his weekly radio broadcast to oppose Lindberg, decides to campaign for the presidency in September 1942. Intense anti-Semitism becomes virulent. Winchell is assassinated in Boston. The Justice Department starts rounding up and arresting prominent Jews. Hitler's foreign minister von Ribbentrop travels to Washington ostensibly to attend a state dinner but actually to pressure Lindberg to formulate "more stringent anti-Jewish measures." Lindberg, who to enhance his mystique flew himself to his political rallies and meetings, disappears. The facts, as they emerge, reveal that the Nazis have held Lindberg's young son—supposedly kidnapped—in a German military school and kept Lindberg hostage to him. Vice President Wheeler orders mass arrests of prominent figures which causes a backlash that ultimately returns Franklin Roosevelt to the White House in 1942. FDR takes the nation into war and history resumes its epic chronology.

On one level I suppose it can be said that Roth's alternative history (which I've condensed rather severely) purports to show how easily such persecutions could occur in the U.S. and the extent to which otherwise decent people would permit them. Roth offers us a political moral allegory. Elect a charismatic and celebrated president with little domestic experience and less international expertise but a strong sense of how the world

should be organized, confront that president with a threat, and see how quickly public hysteria will wither individual rights. Roth's family story, the one narrated by Philip, shows a family trying to hold together amid unforeseen and unpredictable events. In a world where being different simultaneously means being frightening to others who don't understand you and frightened all the time yourself of their ignorance, one's only defense may lie in an active and skeptical intelligence. Even that may not be enough to prevent disaster.

Disaster is what Richard Clarke anticipates for the U.S. if the government fails to learn from the mistakes that led up to and followed September 11, 2001. "Ten Years Later" takes the form of a September 11, 2011 anniversary lecture to the Kennedy School of Government. The lecturer, presumably Clarke himself, looks back on "the second wave of al-Qaeda attacks" that have brought the U. S. "spiral[ing] downward in terms of economic strength, national security, and civil liberties." Rather than use commercial airliners as bombs to destroy large buildings, this second wave of attacks begins with suicide bombers who detonate themselves in casinos, theme parks, and other places where Americans gather for amusement. The nation's permissive gun laws allow terrorists to arm themselves and attack shopping malls and public transit systems. Terrorists will infiltrate computer networks with viruses and worms. Ultimately, they attack chemical plants and cause panic in the areas surrounding those plants.

Meanwhile American foreign policy, in taking an arrogant go it alone approach to Europe and the Middle East, has exacerbated tensions and produced greater instability. Using Saudi Arabia as its base for bombing Iran and destroying that nation's nuclear facilities, the U.S. inflames anti-American feelings among Islamic fundamentalists who ultimately overthrow the House of Saud. Crude oil prices skyrocket to \$85 a barrel.

In the U.S. anti-Arab hostility leads to acts against American citizens of Middle Eastern descent even though few of the second wave terrorists derive from the Middle East. Congress imposes a new draft and creates new courts to handle suspected terrorists.

Civil liberties erode in the face of domestic security threats, real and perceived. America becomes a fundamentally different country, suspicious of its neighbor Canada, alienated from its European and Asian allies, and enervated by internal indecision and dissent.

Clarke clearly anticipates some such scenario coming into play if the American government doesn't correct mistakes it made leading up to and after 9-11. Not since the Carter Administration has the U.S. made any serious attempt to lessen the country's dependence on imported foreign oil. That must change. The U.S. must develop adequate and accurate intelligence about the

middle Eastern countries and about the various terrorists networks working within them. We as a nation must be prepared to engage "the Islamic world in a true battle of ideas." (I infer that Clarke doesn't think the recently enacted reorganization of the intelligence agencies and creation of an intelligence 'czar' accomplished what's needed in this area.) Finally, the U.S. must correct the mistakes that resulted from the invasion of Iraq, the greatest of which—as he predicted in *Against All Enemies*—would be creation of a breeding and training ground for new generations of terrorists. One can pray that Clarke's anticipations are wrong, but as he says in a concluding author's note, his scenario is not worst case; nuclear and biological attacks are worst case.

Perhaps not, though. Azar Nafisi recounts life in Iran during the Cultural Revolution as the ayatollahs systematically transformed Iran into the Islamic Republic of Iran by imposing their fundamentalist religious ideology on the country. Daily life became a matter of fearful encounters with squads of thought police, the enforcers of Islamic law: the Revolutionary Guards who would arrest and carry away people who might never again be seen; and government committees that proposed new laws and restrictions on all forms, particularly Western forms, of thought and expression. The Islamic Republic practiced totalitarian brainwashing on a national scale and, disastrously, tried to extend it to Iraq in what resulted in a war of attrition for both countries. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* follows the lives of Nafisi, who had been teaching English and American literature at the University of Tehran before she was dismissed, and eight of her female students as they met to read and discuss novels by Nabokov, Fitzgerald, Austen, James and others. Reading acted as resistance to the ayatollahs' view that history was wholly foreseen and encompassed in the words of the prophet. For Nafisi and her female students literature functioned to keep alive imagination and skeptical intelligence and their crucial place in defining and locating the self. Literature for them functioned, as it must in any society that hopes to remain vital and open, as subversive of the orthodox, the status quo, the *idée fixe*, the horror.

And that is why in one significant respect Richard Clarke is right. The U.S. as a nation must engage in a serious contest of ideas with cultures it until now has made minimal efforts at understanding. Vietnam should have taught us that. Failure to do so will bring those alternative or anticipated visions of history into terrifying actuality. 'What if' will be followed by 'what now?'

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